Algis Budrys on Robert A. Heinlein

Fantasy & Science Fiction

SEPTEMBER

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P.E. Cunningham

Russell Griffin

Rudy Rucker

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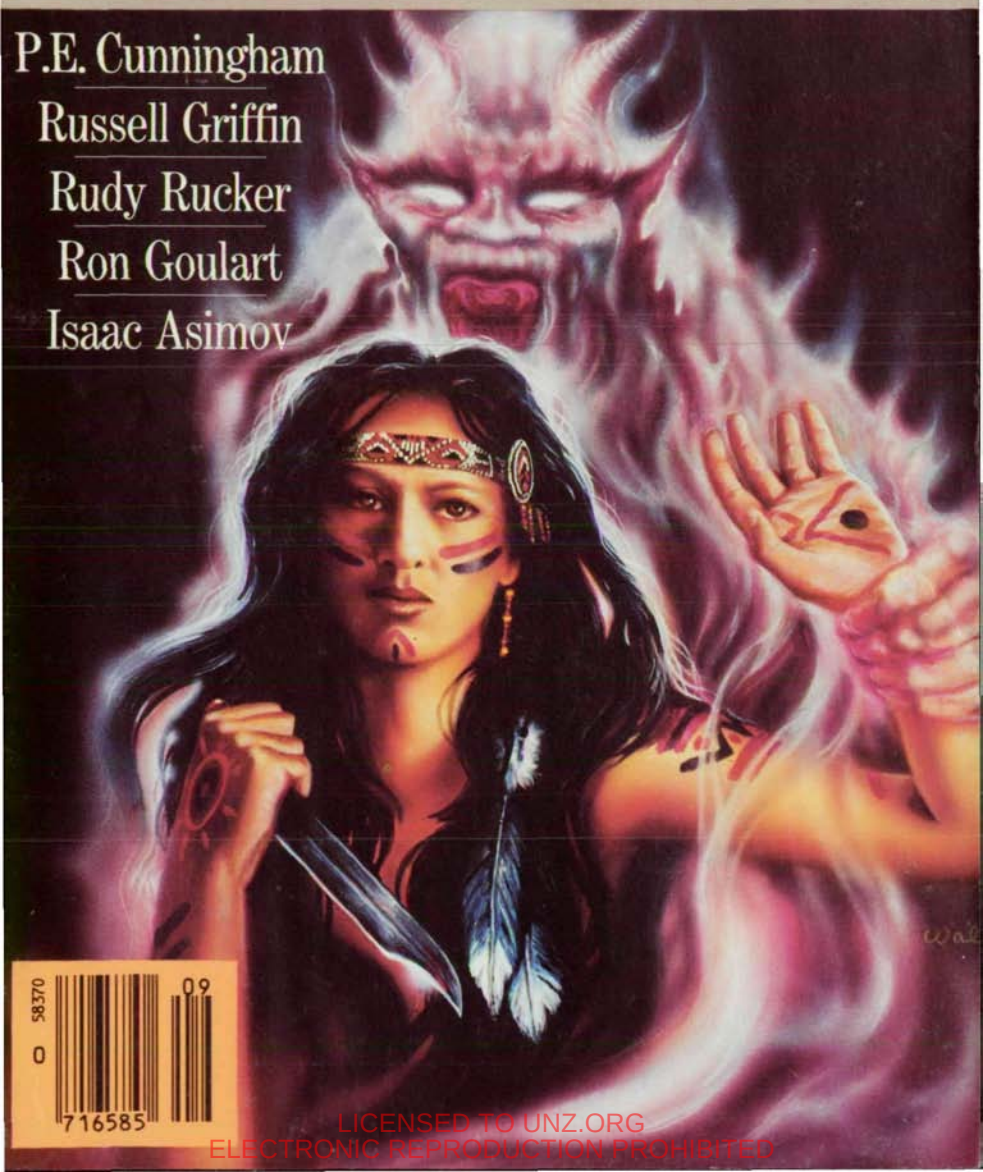
Isaac Asimov



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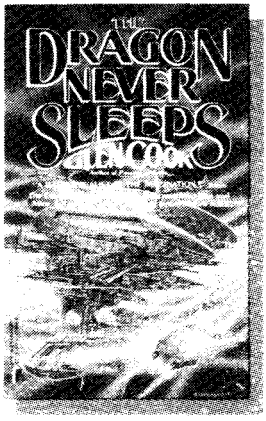

The setting: Canon Space. A time when great mercantile forces have settled into almost medieval roles combining characteristics of noble houses and guilds. In earlier times, the Houses combined resources to build and arm the Guardships—huge, almost invincible warships which cruise the Web, essentially maintaining the status quo.

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A WORD FROM Brian Thomsen

Senior Editor of Questar Books, Named Editor of the Year for 1987 by Rod Serling's The Twilight Zone Magazine

I will always remember my first introduction to the music of Richard Strauss. It was a theme that I quickly memorized (as did almost everyone else), and immediately called to mind "the Dawn of Man." It was the opening theme to 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY, and though I have seen the movie countless times since then, I will always recall that first time.

2001 was the first movie that I had ever seen where I didn't mind not thoroughly understanding what was happening. I was completely drawn into this o.t-so-near future, with its threshold that led beyond my wildest dreams. 2001 had captured that often cliched "sense of wonder."

Little did I know that I would later become the editor on Arthur C. Clarke's CRADLE, a Warner hardcover coming in August.

And when you see me around, be sure to ask me what the best military SF novel I've read in a long time is (Clue: It's by Glen Cook).

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DAW SCIENCE FICTION

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THE
TEAM SPECTRA
REPORT

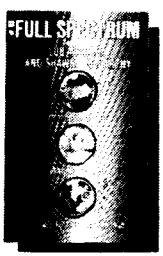
So, anyway, we were sitting in this great Chinese restaurant on West 54th Street called Imperial Dragon (where else would a bunch of science-fiction editors go?) and the conversation got around to the future of Spectra. In our ultimate publishing fantasies, we were asking, what kind of writing would we like to see more of? Well, each of us have specific sub-genres that interest us more than others, but all of us at the table agreed that we reserved our greatest affection for the kind of science fiction and fantasy that breaks new ground, that tells a story that hasn't been told a million times before. The kind that makes you sit back and wonder for a while.

By the time the Crispy Orange Beef arrived (stunningly prepared, big chunks of beef with wispy curls of orange rind), we had decided that we needed a new forum in which to declare our definition of the "state of the art." Almost as immediately, we decided that this forum should be an enormous original anthology and that it should be called **Full Spectrum**. So we announced our intentions to the community, the stories began to arrive and a year later we were very proud of the results.

Full Spectrum includes twenty-five stories and nearly 200,000 words from some of the most brilliant writers working in our field today. There are plenty of names you've heard before, such as Gregory Benford, Thomas M. Disch, Lisa Goldstein, Richard Grant, Nancy Kress, Jack McDevitt, James Morrow, Pat Murphy, Lewis Shiner and Norman Spinrad. There are several names you've heard before if you've been paying attention. And then there are five (yeah, we were surprised, too) stories—all *extremely* good—by writers who have never been published before. As you might have guessed from the title, the idea behind the anthology was to present the widest possible range of science fiction and fantasy reading experiences in one volume. Therefore the stories run from Spinrad's harrowing "Journals of the Plague Years," to Goldstein's dreamy "My Year with the Aliens," to Disch's haunting "Voices of the Kill," to Shiner's outrageous "Oz," to Kevin J. Anderson and Doug Beason's powerful, hard sf story "Reflections in a Magnetic Mirror," to Steven Bryan Bieler's gorgeous baseball story "Tinker to Evers to Chance."

In a very real sense, **Full Spectrum** is our love song to science fiction and fantasy. We hope it represents much of what is wonderful about our literature. Please give it a try.

And if you're ever in Manhattan, be sure to visit Imperial Dragon. Order the Velvet Corn Soup. Spectacular.



BANTAM SPECTRA

TEAM SPECTRA

FULL SPECTRUM

edited by Lou Aronica
and Shawna McCarthy

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy&ScienceFiction

Including VENTURE SCIENCE FICTION

SEPTEMBER • 39th Year of Publication

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COVER BY RON WALOTSKY FOR "THE SON OF WALKS THROUGH FIRE"

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P. E. Cunningham wrote "Satisfaction Guaranteed" (June 1987). In this new story, the author turns to the legends of the American Indians and offers a suspenseful tale about an outpost of soldiers under siege by something so powerful it seems beyond understanding.

The Son of Walks Through Fire

By P. E. Cunningham

THE CALL TO arms sounded just before dawn. It brought Major Willis dashing out of his quarters with his belt still unbuckled and his shirttail flapping. He had heard this particular alarm only twice before. Both times, soldiers of the governor had died.

The Kashika! It couldn't be. I thought we'd got them all on the reservation—

Most of the clans, perhaps. But some had escaped the soldiers' efforts and hidden themselves in the hills. They appeared and disappeared like ghosts, and left burning outposts and bodies to mark their passing. They had never, to Willis's knowledge tried to attack a stockade.

However, as Colonel Detwiler had taken the pains to drill into him, with the Kashika, any atrocity was possible.

"Here, Major." Detwiler was up in the near blockhouse. He had his pistol out, but held it casually, tapping the barrel against his thigh. "Nothing to worry about," he said as Willis climbed the ladder to his side. "Just a couple of drunken savages showing their teeth at their betters."

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There were six of them, black-haired and wizened as mummies, their skin baked brown by the sun. They ringed a seventh, a hulking muscular brute clad only in a buckskin breechclout. He looked out of place among his companions, a boarhound surrounded by a litter of starving pups. His face was painted in scarlet whorls, the war symbols of a Kashika spirit-man.

He spied Willis and Detwiler up in the blockhouse and sneered. "Cowards!" he roared. "Hiding behind your walls like quivering rock rabbits. Come face me like men, sick-skins, or I'll pull your walls down around you and drag you out by the ears!"

Detwiler's mouth tightened beneath his pepper mustache. "Impudent bastard, I'll give him that. You'd think they'd have learned by now."

Willis said nothing. Something in the big Kashika's manner struck him as . . . after a moment's reflection, his mind provided the word *uncanny*. The way he stood, the tilt of his head, his narrowed eyes. . . .

The spirit-man raised his hands to the sky, as if he would seize the wind and take its power for his own. He faced the stockade gate and roared a string of words in the guttural Kashika tongue.

The walls shook.

Willis grabbed for a handhold as the planking twisted under his feet. Then he forgot about his footing as he saw what was happening to the walls of the stockade itself. The stout posts, which had withstood rifle-shot and flaming arrow, thunderstorm and tornado gales, were swaying in their bindings like saplings in the wind. Only, there was no wind, nor distant thump to mark the use of cannon. There was a force at work here that Willis had no name for. The very earth seemed to writhe with it, flinging those along the walls and manning the blockhouses off their feet. All but the Kashika.

The gate creaked and groaned. The natives laughed raggedly and went for their knives and bows. Willis clawed for his pistol. If the gate burst—

The gate held, only just. The wind, or the force, subsided; the stockade walls steadied. The rising sun touched a number of cracks in some of the posts, like gaping wounds.

The big Kashika sagged, his arms dropping to his sides. His fury and frustration were clear upon his face. Willis realized he must have expected the gate to give way before his power. Another emotion flitted briefly across the Kashika's features. Hunger? Greed? The major couldn't tell.

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He stared down at the spirit-man. His blue eyes met the native's — black and flat as tar, with scarlet fire burning in their depths. They glowed as if hungry for blood. Willis snapped his own gaze away. In all his travels, he had never seen eyes like those, not among the Kashika or any tribe he knew. Not among humans.

Two of the spirit-man's followers rushed forward to support their exhausted leader. He shook them off and sought out Detwiler. Throughout the assault, only Willis and the colonel had managed to keep on their feet. Detwiler still held his pistol, but not so casually now.

The big Kashika smirked. "Impressed, whiteskin? They say you *kechi* respect only power. That power enough?" His laugh was a harsh, high keen, with little humanity in it. He pointed a finger at Detwiler. "The Kashika take pity on you, whiteskin. We grant you six days. You will return to your soft land in the east, to your squalling babes and women-kings. You may take only your lives. You will leave your fort and your horses and cattle. If you are not gone, I will return and pull down your walls, and the Kashika will gut you on spears like the rabbits you are."

Sneering, he turned his back ful upon the stockade and swaggered away at the head of his followers. Leisurely, with many crude insults and gestures, the natives mounted their stocky ponies and trotted off into the hills.

Detwiler was livid. "Savages! They must have raided another outpost, got their filthy red hands on a heavy gun, or dynamite — Willis! I want a column sent after those renegades immediately. Shoot as many as you have to."

"Sir, the treaty—"

"The treaty's with respectable natives, not with a pack of wild outlaws. They attacked the stockade. They threatened us! Damned bloody animals. Show 'em a little leniency, and they slit your throat. Brute force. That's all a brute can understand."

"Yes, sir," Willis said. He did not waste breath arguing with his commanding officer. Detwiler had been out here for five years with little to show for it; he would not welcome advice from a subordinate newly assigned to the fort. Willis ordered up the column, even though he was as aware as the men of the futility of it. The Kashika knew the land as a man knows his lover's body; they would be long and untraceably gone before the first soldier rode through the gate.

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A. A. MILNE

He enchanted you with *Winnie the Pooh*
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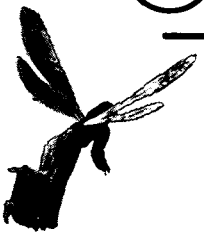
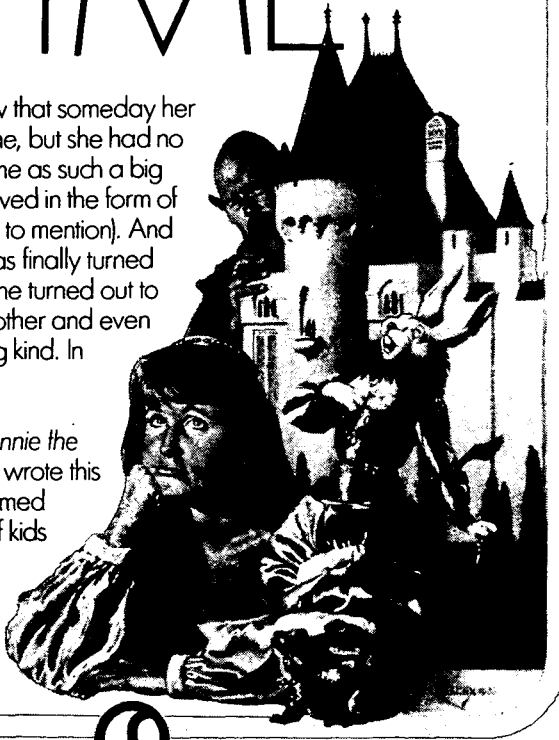
ONCE ON A TIME



The princess knew that someday her prince would come, but she had no idea that he'd come as such a big shock. First he arrived in the form of (well, it's too nasty to mention). And then, when he was finally turned back into himself, he turned out to be a beast of another and even more confounding kind. In short, a man.



Before writing *Winnie the Pooh*, A. A. Milne wrote this fairy tale that is aimed over the heads of kids —to split every grown-up's sides.

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SIGNET FANTASY

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Willis spent the rest of that morning pondering the attack. Cannon fire had not shaken the walls; of that he was certain. Nor had shells or dynamite. This was something outside his experience ... almost. Willis had also spent five years on the frontier, dealing with — and sometimes fighting —the natives that peopled the hills and prairies and deserts. More than once he had encountered forces he had to label supernatural. He didn't know how to combat it . . . but he knew of a people that could.

In the end it was the Kashika's eyes that decided him. Without consulting Colonel Detwiler — he knew how well *this* suggestion would go over — Willis summoned one of the scouts and sent him east, with a message to a man who had been his friend. The Kashika might be the prairie's craftiest warriors, but no one surpassed Walks Through Fire of the Potohathan when it came to matters of magic.

The scout returned within three days and presented himself to the colonel. Detwiler at once sent for Willis. Willis drew in his breath, but made no comment on the marked change in the man. The scout was a sullen-eyed half-breed with contempt for both red men and white. The man in the colonel's office was nervous and fidgety and licked his lips every few moments. His eyes, no longer sullen, darted here and about, but mostly faced the ground. Willis surmised he'd found the Potohathan.

"Major," Detwiler barked. "Dolan here informs me you sent him out to treat with another savage camp. Without my express orders."

Willis kept his eyes level. "That's correct, sir."

Detwiler tapped his pipe on the desktop. "You have an explanation?"

"I do, sir." Part of the truth would suffice. "I spent some time among the Potohathan. Their chief, Walks Through Fire, was my host and friend. The Potohathan were here before the Kashika and have been their enemies for centuries. If anyone could tell us how to round up that group that attacked us, they're the ones."

"Set a savage to catch a savage, eh?" Detwiler almost smiled. "We'll overlook the matter of your insubordination, for the moment. Let's hear what Dolan's got to say."

With a flick of a glance toward the colonel, the scout addressed the major. "Walks Through Fire, leader of the Sun People, remembers well his brother Bristlelip, he whose hair shines like the eye of the Sun." The man spoke as if reciting a lesson, one he must repeat letter-perfect. "Your

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name sings joy into his ears and in the ears of his wives and children."

"'Bristlelip,' Major?" Detwiler said.

Willis grinned and fingered his blond mustache. "Their 'speakname' for me. It's not a good idea to say your true name out loud, in case a witch hears it and uses it against you." The Colonel harrumphed. "I'm sorry," Willis said to the scout. "Go on."

"It sorrows Walks Through Fire that he cannot come himself to the whiteskin's camp. . . ."

Detwiler snorted. "So much for your redskin 'friend,' Major."

". . . but he sends his son, a brave well versed in magic and master of many songs, to aid you in your times of troubles."

"Magic?" Detwiler's second snort was clearly derisive. "Is that what this is all about? You think what happened to the walls was some kind of native hocus-pocus?"

"I never said that, Colonel. Still, this *is* their land. . . ."

"*Was*, you mean. This is government property now. Five years I've held this post, Major. If there's any 'magic' here, I've yet to see it."

"All the same, sir—"

"Hmph." Detwiler thrust his pipe into his mouth and waved a curt dismissal to the scout. The man scurried out. "Native magic. Lived with 'em, did you? For a bit too long, I'd wager. Still, they're canny fighters. Sly as rats. Could be this boy's got some rudimentary military knowledge locked up in that animal skull. What the hell, it's worth a try. The governor wants this land cleared out for homesteading, and he doesn't much care how we do it. I'll leave the preparations up to you. They're your friends, after all." He took a contemptuous drag on his pipe. "Potohathans, eh? Well, they're a pretty tame bunch. I suppose they won't cause trouble. Hope there's not too many of them. The damned brutes tend to stink."

"Yes, sir," Willis said.

LONG, LONG ago," said Walks Through Fire, "before wind and sky, before the coming of the bloodthirsty Kashika, when your people were but babes in the cradle, were the Potohathan. Sun opened her eye upon us and said, 'I see you are a peaceful people. Not for you the bloody path to war. I will give you instead the power of good magic with which to defend yourselves.' And she sang to us her songs of power, and so we have become a mighty people."

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Willis had his doubts about those origins, but six months observing their shamans and medicine women left him with none concerning Potohathan magic. They were the one people the Kashika, the fiercest warriors on the frontier, had never conquered. Maybe this was just another Kashika strike-and-run attack, but the eyes of the spirit-man said otherwise. Willis had to be certain.

Shortly after daybreak the watch reported three riders on the eastern horizon. Willis would have preferred to meet them alone, but Detwiler took charge, decked out in full military regalia, with a dozen armed and mounted soldiers at his back. "Redskins respect a show of force," he told Willis. "It makes 'em think twice about trying something."

Willis strongly doubted the stockade was in danger from the approaching trio. His mind groped through old memories. Walks Through Fire had three wives, seven daughters, and one son. What was the boy's name? He couldn't have been more than twelve when Willis had lived with his family. Was the boy a warrior already? Or a shaman? That would be unusual. Potohathan women were the keepers of the songs, not the men. Still, Walks Through Fire was a charming old cuss, who could bend tradition like a bow and make his people accept it. He would not have sent his son among the whites if he didn't trust the boy's abilities.

The riders had drawn near enough for him to make out their features. Two were slim, handsome youths, perhaps nineteen or twenty. They sat their ponies with the grace of expert horsemen, wary and prepared to defend to the death the figure who rode between them. This third rider, wrapped in a feathered robe, showed neither hostility nor fear toward the soldiers. Willis leaned forward in his saddle, squinting. That didn't look like the boy he remembered. That looked like —

Detwiler reined in abruptly. "Hell's teeth!" he exploded. "That's a *girl!*"

Willis recognized her now, beneath the black hair braided with shells and the yellow face paint that betokened a chief's son. But that couldn't be little — "Kyuni?"

The girl brought her pony to a halt several paces in front of Willis and Detwiler, the boys two paces behind her. She raised her right palm in formal greeting and spoke a string of words in the liquid Potohathan tongue. Willis heard none of it. His mind had gone empty as the southern desert. Kyuni, Walks Through Fire's daughter? Where was his son?

"A girl," Detwiler growled through his teeth. "Another god-damned

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redskin insult. I should have expected as much. Well! We'll show 'em how a civilized man takes these things in stride." He kneed his horse forward. "Me — Detwiler," he said in broken Kashikan, with a thump to his chest that set his medals rattling. "Me chief at fort. Give thanks you come. Give many greeting."

"Sun and sky look with favor upon you, Colonel Detwiler." She spoke their language fluently, as befitted the ambassador of a powerful chief. Several of the soldiers snickered. The more disciplined native youths held their faces expressionless. "I bear the name Kyuni, the son of Walks Through Fire. My father is ill, and could not ride in answer to your message. In me, he stands before you. I will fulfill his promise to you as he would himself."

Detwiler blinked. "Hrumph. Yes. Major Willis will explain matters." He motioned the soldiers into a flanking escort. Kyuni barked a command to the two boys, who dropped back into a rear guard. She ranged her pony up beside Willis's bay mare. Yellow bars of paint crinkled as she smiled. "Major Bristlelip. Sun smiles on us both, that we meet again. My father misses you greatly, and would be pleased to have you visit with us again."

Willis swallowed down a sandy throat. "Kyuni . . . your brother . . . why isn't he. . . ."

Her dark eyes grew grave. "My brother, Slow Bear, died of smallspot fever a season gone. My father has no other sons, and is not likely to get any. As his eldest unmarried daughter, I was chosen to become chief's son."

Willis nodded, understanding. It wasn't unknown for a woman to take up a man's position within the tribe. Especially now, with so many young men lost in battle to either the white soldiers or their diseases. "My spirit grieves for Slow Bear," he said in Potohathan.

"He no longer suffers. Sun smiles." She shifted subject briskly. "You spoke of a danger you believe only we can counter."

"Yes." He lowered his voice, with a glance at Detwiler. "My war chief doesn't believe me, but I think the Kashika have found a source of evil magic."

She nodded, once more solemn-eyed. "So our scouts report. The blood-drinkers sing new songs of power, and boast they will reclaim their land from all who dare oppose them. My father was about to send me out, when your messenger came to us."

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"Then you know—"

"We hear rumors on the wind. We know nothing — yet. We will hold council with you and your war chief. Then we will know."

Willis, under Detwiler's supervision, had arranged for an empty guardhouse to serve the party as their camp, and a steer butchered in honor of Walks Through Fire and his son. After dinner, Kyuni dismissed her guards and joined Willis and Detwiler in the colonel's quarters. Willis, well versed in Potohathan customs, brought out a clay pipe and tobacco and passed it around. Detwiler took a brief puff for politeness' sake before handing the pipe to Kyuni. "Major Willis has told you why we sent for you?"

She exhaled a series of little clouds. "You have trouble with the Kashika. This is an old tale. All have trouble with the Kashika."

"It runs deeper than that," Willis said. He told her of the attack on the stockade. The spirit-man. The disruption of the walls. The Kashika's eyes.

She listened in silence until he finished, then set the pipe aside. "Show me where he faced the fort," she said.

Willis led her through the gate, Detwiler, armed and muttering, just behind. Kyuni paused briefly to study the splintered posts, then stepped unerringly and without Willis's guidance to the precise spot where the spirit-man had stood. She knelt, sniffing, her fingertips brushing the earth, which had gone crumbly and curiously black.

She jerked her hand away and leaped back. Her face was tight. "Ai! A *kechi*. Very bad."

"*Kechi*?" Detwiler echoed. "I've heard that word before. What's—"

Kyuni cut him off, addressing Willis. "When did the Kashika say he would return?"

"Six days. That would be, um, the day after tomorrow, I think."

Kyuni lifted her face to scan the evening sky. Her gaze found the white sliver of moon, which had grown thinner since the Kashika's attack. "Hei, yes. The eye of Sun is stong; the *kechi* will not compete with her. Her brother Moon has a softer eye. In another night his eye will close. Then the *kechi* will be free to strike."

"What is all this rubbish?" Detwiler demanded. "Sun, moon—"

Without giving answer, Kyuni swept past him and through the gate, yelling for her escort. Willis and Detwiler were given no choice but to follow. Inside the walls, they found Kyuni conversing with the two youths

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"I cannot destroy it," she said, "no more than a man could destroy the wind."

in rapid Potohathan. Willis, who'd prided himself on his knowledge of the language, could pick out only a word or two. The word *kechi* leaped at him several times, and brought a hardness to the boys' eyes and grimness to their faces. Kyuni snapped a command at them, and they sprinted back to their camp. She turned to rejoin Detwiler and Willis, and almost ran full tilt into the colonel.

"Now see here," Detwiler said. "We asked you here because we thought you could help us round up a couple of renegade Kashika. If you can't—"

"Perhaps I cannot be of help," she said. "This is not a simple Kashika raiding party. I expected to confront one of their spirit-men. I did not know I would have to face a *kechi*."

"Just what is a *kechi*, anyway?" Willis asked.

"A powerful spirit. A demon from outside what is. It feeds—"

"Evil spirits!" the colonel roared. "Now that is just enough! Of all the—"

"Not evil," Kyuni cut in calmly. "It is . . . hungry. Greedy. It takes and takes. What it cannot take, it defiles. This Kashika," she asked Willis, "he is a large man? Strong of muscle and bone?" The major nodded. So, too, did Kyuni. "Ai, yes. Strong in body, weak or sick in soul, easy prey to an eager spirit. You face no man. A *kechi* has him, Major Bristlelip. As a spirit, a *kechi* can do little. In a warrior's body, bound to the world, it may take as it wishes. It will drive the Kashika's flesh until he burns to ash, then take another body, and another, growing ever stronger."

"Can you destroy it?"

For a moment the dark eyes in her composed face flickered with a young girl's uncertainty. "I cannot destroy it," she said at last, "no more than a man could destroy the wind. But I may be able to drive it back to its home." Her voice turned brisk. "I must prepare. There are rituals, and songs. . . . I must not be disturbed. Two days — ai! So short, but I think enough. I will meet the *kechi*."

She turned her back to them and strode toward the guardhouse. Detwiler rounded on Willis. "Help from your friends, you said. Help! Damn it, have you thought about what would happen if the Kashika burn this fort? If they get control of the pass and the hills? There are homesteads out

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there, Major. Ever seen a man's body after a pack of those devils get through with it? Or what they do to captured women? I'm responsible for those lives, and for the lives of the men of this garrison. I'll take any military help I can get, even if it comes from a savage. I *don't* need some wild-eyed redskin squaw spouting 'evil spirit' malarkey!"

"*They* believe it, Colonel. It could make a difference. Let her go ahead with whatever she's planned. At the very least, she might be able to lure them out in the open."

"Hmph. 'At the least,' they should all be strung up, every last red dog and pup. Can't trust a one of 'em, no matter what they say." He fingered his mustache. "'*Kechi.*' The Kashika have been calling us that since we built the stockade. I always figured it was some kind of redskin curse word."

Greedy. It takes and takes. "I suppose it could be taken that way, Colonel."

The night melted into day and into night again. Kyuni shut herself up in the guardhouse, from which only the sound of her chanting emerged, rising and falling in pitch and continuing for hours on end. When Detwiler went to investigate, he found the door guarded by the Potohathan youths, who wordlessly and firmly thwarted all attempts at entry. The colonel descended on Willis. "What the hell is she doing in there? Howling like a sunstruck dog. It's upsetting the men. Get in there and see what she's up to."

"Sir, I can't interrupt whatever ritual she's—"

"You can and you will. Damn it all, man, lives are riding on this! The governor's counting on us to keep this land secure. I'll not lose my command because of some screeching native girl. Do as you're ordered, Major."

Willis went, reluctantly. He had little hope of seeing Kyuni. The boys would turn him away, he would report his failure to the colonel, and that would end it. Except that the youths stood aside at his arrival and with curt words bid him enter. Perplexed, he went inside.

The room was dark and smoky; his eyes couldn't find her at first. As he stepped inside, his foot caught on a furry lump, and he almost went sprawling. Small but strong hands caught him. "Major Bristlelip." Kyuni's voice, just in front of him, had grown hoarse from hours of chanting. She returned to her seat against the far wall. The Potohathan medicine bundle he had almost tripped over lay open on the floor before her. She had

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painted her face and arms and torso in streaks of scarlet and black, the loincloth that was her only garment bearing similar symbols. At her gesture, he sat on the floor, the medicine bundle between them. "Why have you come?"

"I, um, to see how you were, uh, getting along . . . you sound so. . . . can I get you a drink? We've got some whiskey, or—"

"No. Thank you, no. I have water; I dare take nothing else. I must be pure before I meet the *kechi*."

"You don't sound very confident."

"I would prefer my great-grandmother had come in my place. But she carried many years, and could not make the journey even had I time to send for her. I asked my guard to admit you, if you came. I will need help for this, even a white man's. A *kechi* is beyond the powers of most of our magic women. Perhaps beyond mine. Even my father could not suspect the Kashika would be so desperate."

"*Desperate?*"

She gave a brief nod. "Where this fort now stands was once the heart of Kashika land. The bones and blood of their warriors lie beneath the earth. Now your people come in a great white wave, and the Kashika are herded like agency cattle into the southern desert, where their women grow sick and their children go hungry."

She dug her fingers into the dirt and crushed a palmful of earth. "Long ago, when my great-grandmother was a maiden, a *kechi* came among us. One of our clans was murdered by the white soldiers. The shaman's son called on the spirits for help, and let a *kechi* take him. The demon turned upon us first, to build its strength. We would have destroyed it, but Old Mother found the song to drive it out, after a long and wearying fight." She dusted the dirt from her hands. "Since that day the Potohathan have sought only peace with the whites. We dare not fall prey again to the sickness that would open our souls to the *kechi*."

Desperation. . . . "I never thought of it that way before. I never considered. . . ."

"We should have foreseen this. The Kashika have always been mad. To loose a demon — ai! It is well you sent for me. The *kechi* will feed itself full on the Kashika. Then it will take your fort to use as its camp. From here it will move against the Potohathan. Then against your people. Its appetites are huge, and it has no limits. We must stop it here and

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now, before it grows beyond our power."

"You said your great-grandmother fought one and beat it. How? Can you do the same?"

Kyuni shook her head, her unbound black hair swinging. She reached carefully into the medicine bundle. "Old Mother's protector spirit was Snake, the way of weave and strike. Mine is Coyote, the trickster." Willis's eyes, grown accustomed to the gloom, could see now that the bundle was fashioned from a coyote's hide. From it, Kyuni withdrew a small knife. "I have neither Snake's speed, nor Bear's strength, nor Eagle's courage. I have only my wits. I must trick the *kechi* from its body and strike its spirit form. Give me your hand."

Confused, he obeyed. And yelped as Kyuni drew the knife across his wrist and opened a shallow cut. She held his arm still while she smeared blood on the blade. Abruptly, she released him and, before he could stop her, made a similar cut on her own arm. Her blood mixed with his on the knife. "Hai! Here is our weapon, Major Bristlelip. The Sun People's magic and a white man's power. You must leave me now. I must prepare the bait to lure it from the Kashika."

Willis rubbed the cut on his wrist. Already the bleeding had stopped, as had Kyuni's. Potohathan magic? He almost missed her words. "Bait?"

"The *kechi* has been many days in the Kashika. The man's flesh will not serve it for much longer . . . though it retains its cravings. Though I am called chief's son, still I wear a woman's body. As I told you, the *kechi* has huge appetites."

JUST BEFORE dawn the Kashika returned. The eye of Moon had closed, and a thin scum of clouds had blown up to mask the meager starlight. No sounds came from the guardhouse. The soldiers checked and rechecked their weapons and muttered among themselves, nervous as deer at the scent of danger. Willis heard, or imagined he heard, demonic laughter in the air.

"Ho, dog's sons! Dung-eaters! Not gone yet? Come out, then, and face your doom!"

Willis climbed into the near blockhouse. The sight of the man froze his heart in mid-beat. No longer was the spirit-man's body a mountain of muscle and bone. The flesh had been withered away, like a waterskin sucked dry. His legs, thin as sticks, could barely hold him up. Yet his

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voice boomed cannon-loud, with a power that body's lungs could not have produced. His eyes, a total, soulless black, dominated his shrunken face. His six followers shambled in his wake like animated puppets.

It will feed itself full on the Kashika. . . . It will move against the Potohathan . . . then against your people. . . .

"To your posts, men." Detwiler clambered up the ladder. "Ready arms. Fire on my order. How many are out there, Major?" The colonel peered down at the raiders and snorted. "Doesn't look like they're long for the world, does it? And I spent a week in worry. Hell, a couple of warning shots, and they'll lie down and surrender. . . ."

The big Kashika laughed and raised his hand.

The force that had shaken the walls before was a thin spring breeze compared to this. The blockhouse lurched and shuddered. The earth itself bucked like a mustang at the spirit-man's command. The gate rattled on its hinges. Detwiler, scrabbling madly for balance, bellowed at the men to fire. The Kashika howled with glee.

The supports of the blockhouse cracked clean through. The tower wavered and toppled. At the same instant the gate burst apart in a rain of shattered planks.

A black wave enveloped Willis, followed by a blast of scarlet agony. He had leaped clear just before the blockhouse crashed, but did not land unhurt. One arm was broken, perhaps an ankle as well, and each breath he dragged into his lungs complained of splintered ribs. He couldn't see Detwiler, but could watch, in helplessness, the triumphant entrance of the Kashika.

The men still able opened fire. Their bullets burst in little pops of bright flame all around the spirit-man. He swept his arm in a wide arc, and the men were thrown off their feet, to lie in the dirt. None tried to rise. They gasped and clawed at the earth, their faces mirroring the confusion and weakness Willis felt, as if. . . .

As if their lives were being drained away.

The big Kashika paused. He thrust his nose into the air, like a hound casting for a scent. Beneath the thudding in his ears, Willis heard a voice, young and clear, chanting a song ancient long before Willis's people had ever heard of this land.

Kyuni strode across the compound, her thigh-length hair unbraided, her naked body painted red and black. She approached the Kashika, sing-

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ing, with no fear in her eyes. She clutched a knife, its blade dull with dried blood, in her right hand.

Willis's weakness, the draining feeling, dwindled away. The Kashika had forgotten him. He had seen Kyuni. The man, or the thing that drove the man, all but stank with greed — for the woman, for her life and soul, for the power it could taste within her. Either he had not seen the knife, or had and discounted it. The Kashika bared his teeth like a starving puma and reached for her.

Kyuni swayed beyond his reach. The Kashika lunged. She dodged, mocking his efforts with the taunting yips of the coyote. She led the Kashika into a dance, a lunge, a leap, a dart and weave. She did not try to use the knife. Her singing never faltered.

Willis's right arm was stiff, but still worked. He tried to grope for his pistol. *What's the matter with her? She's got a knife. Why doesn't she kill him?* A whisper of a breeze blew up within the compound, as if called to earth by her song. *Soon,* it hissed. *Not just yet. Wait.*

Kyuni waited a heartbeat too long. She missed a step and stumbled. The Kashika seized her arm and dragged her toward him. He licked his lips and drooled.

Kyuni twisted in his grip. She stabbed him in the shoulder. The blood on the blade pierced deeper than did the metal into flesh; Kyuni's magic, coupled with the familiar taste of white blood, speared the spirit within. The Kashika roared.

For weeks afterward, Willis would pray what he saw was only a pain-induced hallucination. The Kashika's withered body split apart like a dry seed pod. A formless something billowed out of it, a shifting cloud without color, scent, or sound. Willis could see Kyuni's lips moving; she must still be singing, although he couldn't hear her. All sound, all light, were sucked up into the *kechi.* Only the wind continued to grow in intensity.

The *kechi* thinned itself into colorless loops and wound its wispy being about Kyuni's body. It contracted, closing in around her. The wind rose to a gale, ripping at the *kechi.* The demon held fast to its prey. The clouds, lacking the *kechi*'s determination, were scattered by the wind. In seconds the sky was clear.

Sun's eye looked down upon the world.

Freed from the concealing blanket of clouds, the dawn light hit the *kechi.* It steamed like liquid striking fire. A thin wail lanced through

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Willis's mind . . . or perhaps it was the howl of the wind. The *kechi* tried to condense itself, drawing all its power into its core against the overwhelming light of Sun. In that moment of its distraction, Kyuni yanked her knife arm free and plunged the weapon home.

Willis's world went black for a moment. He blinked it back into focus and saw Kyuni, a swaying, panting figure naked in the glow of the dawn. There was no sign of the *kechi.*

A number of howls went up from the direction of the ruined gate. The Kashika's followers milled about in confusion, the force that had both sustained them and fed upon them gone. Kyuni turned toward them and raised her arms, the knife glinting dully in her hand. She shouted at them in Kashikan. "Hai! This fort and all within are under the protection of the Potohathan. I, Kyuni, son of Walks Through Fire and slayer of the *kechi,* say that this is so. Who will challenge me?"

The men stared from her to the shattered body of their spirit-man. They backed away from the gate. Unsteadily at first, then at a staggering run, the Kashika dashed for their mounts. They threw themselves upon their ponies and galloped into the hills.

Willis dragged himself up onto his good elbow and glanced about. The soldiers were either struggling to find their feet, or else lay unconscious where the *kechi*'s attack had thrown them. Like Colonel Detwiler, who lay a short way behind Willis, with a broken leg and a good many bruises. Willis was glad the colonel had missed this; it would make the major's subsequent, and edited, report a great deal easier. Willis struggled to his feet even as Kyuni's legs buckled and she sat down hard on the ground. He clenched his teeth against the pain and stumbled to her side. "Kyuni. . . ."

"I live, thank Sun and the Maker Spirit." Her face was ashen, her voice ragged. "Ai! I would not wish to do that again. I feared it would take me along with the Kashika."

"The sun. . . . You had to hold it here . . . delay it until the sun came up. . . ."

"Hei, yes. Old Mother learned the *kechi*'s weakness. She used her song to call forth Sun. The *kechi* could not fight her magic and the strength of Sun at once, and so it fled. Tonight I will make a song of thanks for her, and sing it upon my return."

"It's dead?"

"Not dead. Gone back to its home. No need for *them* to know that."

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She nodded after the departed Kashika. "They will not soon threaten your fort again." Her weary gaze found the remains of the spirit-man, dissolved to powder by the sun. "Or will your soldiers ride out now, to drive them from the hills?"

"I . . . don't think that'll be necessary."

"Hei. It is well. He was not an evil man. Only sick at the fate of his people." She made a sign over the Kashika's body, then dropped the knife onto the pile of bone and ash. She sagged against Willis's good arm. "I will take your drink now, Major Bristlelip."

Three days later, Kyuni left the stockade. She took with her many gifts, a written commendation from the bedridden Colonel Detwiler, and a fine sorrel mare of the colonel's own choosing. Willis, unable to ride out with her, left her at the gate. "You will visit us soon?" she asked. "My father would smile with joy to see you again. So would I."

"I can't, not just now. Got repairs to make first." His grin indicated his splintered arm as well as the splintered wall. "Maybe another time."

"If such a time is granted us. The Kashika are gone. Soon their land will hold your people. Will it be land enough? Or will one day the soldiers ride against the Potohathan as they rode against the Kashika?"

It pained him to hear the sorrow in her voice. More so because he suspected how events would go; he'd seen much of this before. The homesteaders were a hungry lot, and this land was rich in soil and game. "Kyuni, I can't—"

She shook her head. "What comes, comes. We do what we must. I am chief's son, and must consider the welfare of my people. Know always you are welcome in our camp. Sun smiles on you, Major Bristlelip."

Kyuni turned the mare's head east and rode away, the two boys flanking her, leading the gift-laden pony. Willis watched until they were only a cloud of dust on the horizon.

"Nice girl," Detwiler later remarked from his bed, when Willis arrived at his quarters to give his report. "For a savage, that is. Scouts say the Kashika are headed south, toward the reservation. She must've spooked 'em good, whatever she did. Had a military mind, after all. She get her reward?"

"The horse? She seemed happy with it. I think—"

"Not the horse." He snorted. "Humble kid. Didn't ask for a thing, not

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like you'd expect from these greedy buggers. All she wanted was a tour of the fort. I ordered Captain Cutler to—"

Willis felt a chill take hold of his soul. "You . . . showed her the stockade? Vantage points, artillery, troop strength—"

"Oh hell, Major! She's just a girl. A redskin squaw. Bet the place impressed her good. She'll tell her tribe. We won't be having any trouble with *them*, you mark me."

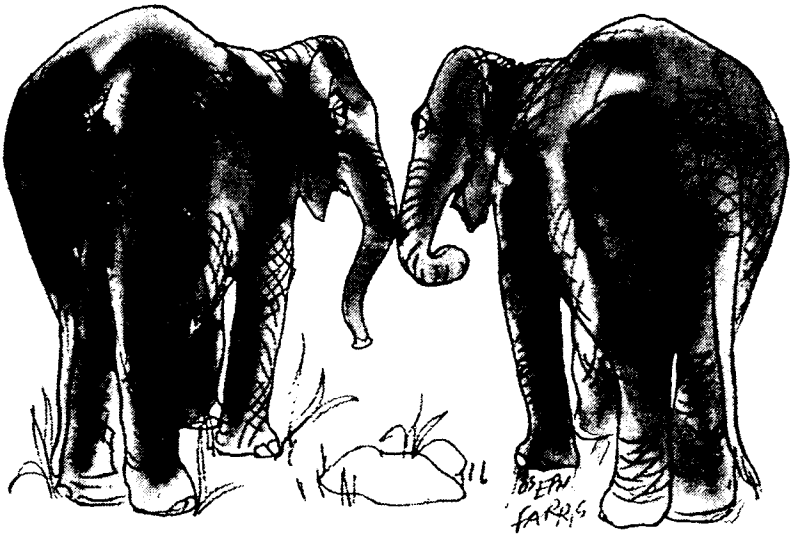
A girl. Chosen to become the son of a chief, whose first duty must always be to her people. A keeper of songs, a woman of both political and supernatural power. A trickster, who had already driven out one invading demon.

Later, while Colonel Detwiler was composing his report to the governor, Willis took inventory of their powder and weapons, their food stores, the number and condition of the horses, the readiness of the men. And quietly doubled the guard on the eastern perimeter.

Author's Note

The Indian tribes described in this story did not actually exist, but are drawn from a compilation of the traditions and beliefs of several plains and desert peoples. The rest is the result of the writer's imagination.

— P. E. Cunningham



"What's wrong with feeling elephantine! You are, after all, an elephant."

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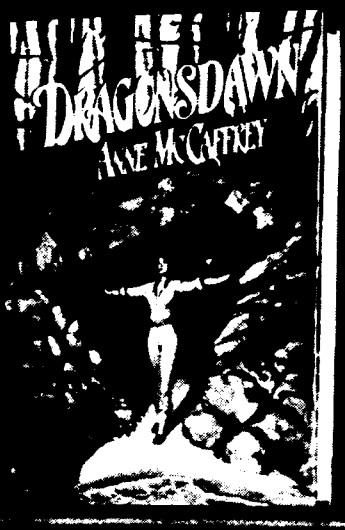
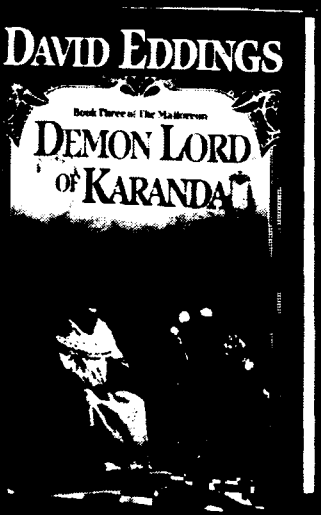


DEMONS, WIZARDS, DRAGONS and VAMPIRES.



SEPTEMBER

DEMON LORD OF KARANDA

Book Three of The Malloreon

By David Eddings

OCTOBER

WIZARD AT LARGE

By Tom Deitz

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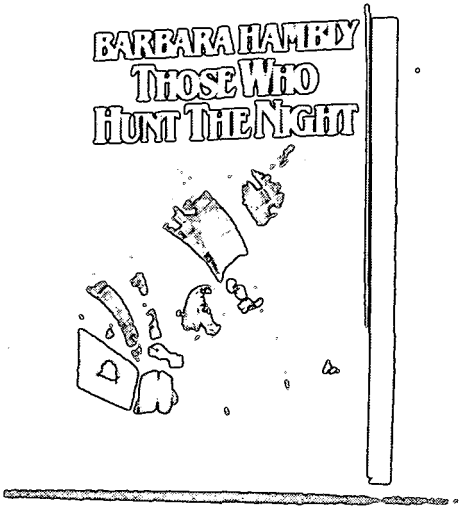

NOVEMBER

DRAGONSDAWN
by Anne McCaffrey

DECEMBER

THOSE WHO HUNT
THE NIGHT
by Barbara Hambly

ANOTHER WONDERFUL FALL FROM DEL REY.

Del Rey Hardcovers

DEL REY #1 in Science Fiction and Fantasy
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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

An Essay on Robert A. Heinlein (1907-1988)

THE GOLDEN Age has ended. Of the bright, energetic band that gathered around *Astounding Science Fiction* and *Unknown* in the late 1930s and early 1940s, only L. Sprague DeCamp and Lester del Rey remain to recall what it was like to routinely foregather in glad company with their peers and John Campbell. They are now the only two who can remember what it was to swap not only ideas but a sense that something was being created *de novo*.

There are no exceptions. Jack Williamson, like Clifford D. Simak, Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore whom he survives, had established a career independent of Campbell before gravitating to him. Fritz Leiber and A.E. van Vogt dealt with Campbell almost exclusively at a distance, by mail, and in fact never met him until years after their first appearances in his magazines. Isaac Asimov and Hal Clement, for all that they certainly contributed to the maturation of the Golden Age, are of a very slightly later generation and missed the dawn.

For that matter, of all the giants named above, DeCamp was strictly speaking in at *ASF*, selling to Orlin Tremaine, before the very, very Campbellian beginning, and in any case DeCamp was and still is rather too *sui generis* to be located at the core of any given literary movement. Conversely, Lester del Rey, though soon on board, missed the very first stages. Arthur C. Clarke did not appear until the mid-1940s, Frank Herbert not until later than that. In fact, when you winnow it down, del Rey is the last of those who can be said to have made the Golden Age and simultaneously have been made by it, now that Robert A. Heinlein is gone. And Lester has not written a new story in years. The Golden Age is over at last.

The roll of the recent dead is agonizing: Theodore Sturgeon (followed closely by Frank Herbert), L. Ron Hubbard, C.L. Moore, and Simak. Pioneer and near-pioneers,

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they have joined Kuttner, A. Bertram Chandler, Eric Frank Russell, E. Mayne Hull, George O. Smith, H. Beam Piper and James Blish . . . the names are in no order of precedence; a hologram has no premier part. Though it is a thought to stagger the mind that somewhere John Campbell may now be putting together new issues, perhaps also with steady contributions from Alfred Bester, Cyril Kornbluth, Edmond Hamilton and Leigh Brackett, and the unjustly unsung David Wright O'Brien. Why not? Campbell put together at least one special issue while still in his prime and pride; could he do less well now? Certainly now that he has Heinlein again?

But that, you say, is sheer romanticism.

The key to Robert A. Heinlein is that he was a tough romantic, just as the key to the Golden Age on which we have all built is that it was tough-romantic, and there has never been a way to decide whether it would have been any different in that respect without Heinlein. And as for how Heinlein might have been without it, the answer is only probably that he would have been exactly the same. Probably yes, but Campbell was that way, and L. Ron Hubbard was that way, long before there was a John Campbell as editor, and there are signs the young Heinlein was mightily impressed by those two old pros (who were roughly of his age when he first broke into print).

But it hardly matters how much the Campbellian ambiance influenced Heinlein in that regard; by his very presence, continued into the 1950s in *ASF*, and continued for years thereafter in his "Campbellian" young-adult novels, and clear up to halfway through *Stranger In a Strange Land* in 1962, all of Heinlein's writing validated what had come together in Campbell's living room just before World War II. Now and again thereafter — with all of *The Moon is A Harsh Mistress*, and parts of *The Number of The Beast*, *Friday*, and *The Cat Who Walks Through Walls* — he continued to recall it. For sheer presence from start to finish, he was Mister Golden Age.

He wrote, from "Lifeline" and *Beyond This Horizon*, as Robert A. Heinlein and as Anson MacDonald, on up into the 1960s, in a consistent style that was irresistably attractive because it was clearly *the* best style for modern speculative fiction. This may have been because he was so instrumental in defining what modern speculative fiction was, but that does not matter because by the time he had hit full stride — and he and his confreres hit it early — the greatest bulk of

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people who read the work were people who had been selected for their liking of the way the work was. It is notable that even when *Galaxy* appeared, and shouldered a place for itself beside and occasionally a bit more to the front of *Astounding*, what was being demonstrated was that the majority of readers could perceive good in Sf that was non-Campbellian, but was still Heinleinian. What brought *Galaxy* to its knees, just before Frederik Pohl picked it up again, were all the evolving editorial experiments in publishing work that was not written correctly — that is, not viable in the Heinlein SF universe.

From the standpoint of academic literary criticism, Heinlein's prose range had always been narrow. All his characters used the same idioms or were damned if they did not, struck one of two attitudes toward life, and were either impossibly disciplined or outlandishly undisciplined. But that is irrelevant to the uses of the Heinlein style; SF from the Golden Age onward has been a literature of icons, and in a universe where everything relates to either a worthy or an unworthy icon, either-or prose is the only thing that will serve best.

From the standpoint of social doctrine, Heinlein remained unswervingly loyal to the us-versus-them ethics of his childhood, however couched in whatever dogma. He rose from one of America's great commercial centers, albeit a generally unsung one; Kansas City, Missouri. K.C. MO for a hundred years was the Cape Kennedy of the riverboat packet and the mule-train and cattle drive, and then of freight-railway commerce. Those days were not yet much waned when Heinlein was a boy, already soaking up the ideals of people who routinely trafficked along the Santa Fe and Chisholm trails and were sinking oil-wells lickety-split all over Eastern Kansas. Then an economic depression, deliberately engineered by Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon in 1927, threw every member of the Heinlein family on his own resources, and doubtless reinforced every entrepreneurial precept, and every instinct against social action as an acceptable practice of federal government. The Great Depression that rocked the remainder of the world two years later was but an aftershock to that corner of the world, though it must have added its bit of philosophical compass-skewing to the Naval Academy graduate on his destroyer a scant decade after the War to End All Wars.

The universe of Robert Heinlein belongs to the ever-alert, the tirelessly skilled, and the incorruptibly

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ethical. All others are passengers and heedless parasites, attractive only to some degree and always unreliable, always ready to blunder in some way distracting to the clean-edged purposes of the man who is correct in his attitudes. They are in fact people who are constitutionally incapable of understanding what is really meant by "There Ain't No Such Thing As A Free Lunch," and each time he heard it casually parrotted by logophillic, merely intelligent, basically soft people who reasoned "Well, O.K., that means there *is* lunch if you can get the coin," Heinlein must have winced — or perhaps chuckled, given the appropriate mood.

To understand the Golden Age and what came to be called Modern Science Fiction, you have got to understand the iron-hard rules of John Campbell's Calvinism, L. Ron Hubbard's Montana boyhood, Lester del Rey's hardscrabble Minnesota childhood, and Heinlein's assimilated desperations; these were all people who faced extinction as *beings*, and when they went on to do their art, the results of those experiences were built into that art's essence. And, again, setting all else aside, Heinlein's own early life, all by itself, was fully sufficient unto Heinlein; if then it resonated with the art of others, and joined in what would become a school of art — a swiftly formed, swiftly grown, swiftly dominant school of art — then by sheer persistence over the years, the dominant perceived tone of science fiction today is readily ascribable more to Heinlein than anyone else.

It is the tone of taking the right attitude, and of a wonderful symmetry in which the most difficult thing to do is always the right thing to do. We have developed out from that — for example, the preWar Futurians and the immediately post-War "New Wave" may be simply described as movements founded on the tenet that the right thing to do is to oppose the overwhelmingly dominant view of SF. Heinlein's later work and his increasingly frank public statements might be said to be based on the determination that only the real Heinlein was eligible to controvert the Heinlein perceived from superficial readings of Golden Age work by Heinlein, and that this was a necessary task.

Other readings of that situation are possible; for instance, that Heinlein, the consummate professional at giving the audience what it liked, had worked around to the not-implausible idea that by now things were at a point where whatever Heinlein did was what the audience liked. But I'm not sure that's not

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just another way of restating the content of the previous paragraph.

However that may be, there was a day when Heinlein — almost uniquely Heinlein — found that at the very beginning of his major exterior career, he had intersected with the dawn of a revolution and had every reason to believe he could stay on top of it. There are few headier feelings for an entrepreneur; in fact, looking only at the entrepreneurial side of an individual, there is *no* headier feeling. To create a universe and to be unable to finally decide whether it resonates to him or he resonates to it, is to be as a god.

Of course, to be worthy of being as a god, one must be a gentleman. To abuse power of one's own making is surely the most damnable sin of all. And so he carried himself, and so all of us who came in contact with him felt both that power and that courteous restraint; one thought of the temptations seething there surely so much like the temptations one would feel in that position, and one could only admire that they never showed.

One would have to be a practiced writer, I think, to fully appreciate the technical deftness that Heinlein so gracefully displayed in his prime. All well and good the obvious, such as the famous "the door dilated" building of local color at a stroke. And it was, it certainly was, a master stroke of comprehension to have realized that the citizens born to a mad environment — that is, any environment to which we were not born — would regard theirs as normal. Of *course* they would speak of its details only offhandedly and in the course of doing business . . . though to Heinlein, much of the "normal" environment was madly soft from his first glimpses of it, with maniacs soberly treating it as real. But that isn't the impressive level of Heinlein's art to those of us who have developed such tricks of our own, find them well suited to our purposes, and after all work in an environment where if we get too obvious with dilating-door subtleties, too many wise readers will point their fingers and snicker.

What impresses me is that no matter how baldly Heinlein spoke of there being only a very few basic stories — The Little Tailor and The Man Who Learned Better were the irreducible minimum, as I recall, and also perhaps the entire maximum — and willingly dissected his craft in purely mechanistic terms (willingly up to a point; some of the hole cards never were turned up), it was never possible for a reader to tell *which* story he was telling. It was only possible to awaken with a start and realize that, for once, one had been *reading* the work as any

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other reader would, instead of studying it as one normally does in this profession.

Heinlein was a master at diverting attention from questions on such matters as whose viewpoint he was using in relation to the Tailor or the Man, until one had gotten to the end. He was a master at validation — that tricky business of ideally having not even one ambiguous detail in a story of whatever length, nor one too many nor one too few, and he could arrange them, under full control, so that they flowed in one apparent direction on the surface while working in quite another way underneath. On the surface, he is about as far from John Collier as one of John Collier's contemporaries could get, but it is extraordinary that in our time we have had two such absolute experts on how a reader's mind works and how that might be turned to an author's advantage while making the reader glad of it.

There are some writers who come very close to being like the best sort of sleight-of-hand worker. In the presence of most of that unique breed at their occupation, one ultimately tires of being the fool; in the presence of the few best, one revels in participation.

By its nature, the skill with which this is done cannot be described in some catchy one of its details, and so it cannot be taken out and dangled as a Heinlein souvenir. It can be named; it is the ability to grok the reader.

It exists I think without dependence on who one is, where one comes from, or where one wishes to go. It is more fundamental than those surface details, and it will pass through any form of aperature. As noted, not many writers have it to a significant degree, as you can tell from comparing Collier's sales figures to Heinlein's, having it does not guarantee mass adulation, nor does it stop the possibility. It is irrelevant to all that; Ian Fleming didn't have it, Edgar Rice Burroughs didn't have it, and Franz Kafka and Josef Conrad didn't have it.

In fact, academic writers are encouraged not to have it, but to develop their esthetics and intellectual persuasions instead. Writers who have it are not prized by intellectuals, except, with a little smile, as authors of "diversions." It is an art — an artifice, if you will, and if wings are the artifice of the raptor borne aloft — of the less than respectable in literature. That tells you a good deal about respectability and what sort sets its standards, but never mind that now. It seems to me to be the supremely writerly art, ranking so far above all others that the mere lack of it does not affect success.

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What it does affect is power, and what is interesting about it is that it will not work at all unless used courteously. In the end, its use validates the Heinlein ethic, and, once again, I could not venture to decide which sprang from which.

The man's work could infuriate at times, and disappoint at times, could not be ignored, and was correct.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Unicorn Mountain, Michael Bishop (Arbor House, cloth, 352 pp, $17.95)

AT FIRST glance, *Unicorn Mountain* seems to be a novel about AIDS, and my immediate response was to shudder — what, Michael Bishop, bastion of integrity in speculative fiction, writing a *trendy novel*!

There was much to feed my fears in the early part of the book. When Libby Quarrels, a middle-aged Colorado rancher, suddenly arrives in Atlanta to bring her ex-cousin-in-law — advertising artist, homosexual, and Person-With-AIDS Bo Gavin — home to Colorado to die, I nearly gagged on the officious sweetness of it all.

Bishop seemed to realize this; the antics and banter of these two are more than a little forced, as if Bishop were grimly determined to make them endearing in spite of it all. They intellectualize about their own actions and attitudes as if the author had given them all a quick lecture on subtext. Libby suffers from relentless ideological correctness, and everyone has the nasty habit of thinking thoughts that just happen to explicate Bishop's carefully knotted and utterly obvious macrame of symbols. This is a novel in which you have to be brain-dead or a frequent reader of Douglas Adams novels not to get the messages.

Sooner than I expected, though, these problems faded into the background, and when Bishop lets us pay attention to the story, it's wonderful.

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Not only do Libby and Bo become genuinely likeable, they are merely two of the many delicious characters in this book.

My favorites were among the Indians: D'Lo, who blows her own head off with a shotgun and then haunts people until they do what she wants; Sam Coldpony, whose marriage to D'Lo broke up early but still forms the spine of his life; Paisley, their daughter, who struggles to find her magical way in the world despite her parents; and unforgettable minor characters like drunken Helbert Barnes and cigar-store shaman DeWayne Sky and his prickly wife Lanna Sue. They are richly human and full of sensible magic — not at all like the hokey Castaneda Indians that have bored us in fiction since the drugged-out hippies invented them in 1967.

There are also unicorns, which Bishop manages to cleanse of the symbolic barnacles they have acquired over the years in order to make them something new. He also gives them a new name — *kartajans* — which looms in this book like the mountain in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind.* Bishop's kartajans come to our world not to heal us, but to be healed; they transform us, not by their perfection, but by the compassion they demand of us.

The triumph of this, Bishop's most artistically whole and successful novel to date, is that he set out to do something that is nearly impossible in fiction: He wrote a novel about constructing a tribe, making a single entity out of dozens of divergent and conflicting personalities. To do it, he had to bring us to know and understand and care about more fully-created characters than most writers produce in a career.

By the end of *Unicorn Mountain,* you will know how to *be* in a tribe. You will have learned to take responsibility for all others, to have respect for them even when they piss you off. You will feel as if Bishop has included you in his made-up family, wrapped you in the God-sheet, and taken you home at last to your true love, who has forgiven you for everything.

Swordspoint, Ellen Kushner (Arbor House, cloth, 269 pp, $15.95)

It is the epitome of the decadent civilized life. The city-state is ruled by a council of nobles, whose choices are limited by law and tradition. Quarrels are settled by duelling, but to avoid excessive bloodshed among the nobility, the actual duel can be fought by hired swordsmen. If a noble's surrogate is pinked — or, in serious quarrels, killed — then his opponent's honor is satisfied, and the lord himself is safe.

St Vier is the best swordsman in the city — as he must be, in a

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swashbuckling imaginary-kingdom fantasy like this one. And, as the best, he naturally gets caught up in the intricate plots of the lords who are struggling for dominance. What matters to him, however, is his private life, which is focused on his lover, Alec, an enigmatic young man with a death wish. Homosexuality in this society is taken to be as normal as adultery, and the relationship between St Vier and Alec is fascinating, quickly winning the reader's sympathy.

The novel begins with two unfortunate pages of excessively self-indulgent writing. If you like vague descriptions of unremarkable scenes in which nothing is happening except a writer trying to wow us with her prose, then you'll be delighted with this opening. Otherwise, start at the top of page three. Kushner never struts like that again. Instead, she draws you through the story with such lucid, powerful writing that you come to trust her completely — and she doesn't let you down.

Oh, there's room for a sequel or two: *Swordspoint* ends with a potential rival practicing his swordsmanship in a far-off country, so we know that there has to be a later volume in which he faces St Vier; and there is plenty of room in this world for more plots and intrigues. But *Swordspoint* is self-contained. It *ends*, and deliciously, too, with Alec's unmasking and the downfall of a dangerously clever lord.

In fact, so sure is Kushner's hand that as I closed the book (with its perfect cover by Tom Canty) it was hard to remember that this same Ellen Kushner has been a junior editor, an earnest young aspirant. I kept thinking I had been in the company of a masterly writer, whom I could trust absolutely. It's the kind of trust that only a special kind of writer earns: the writer who has so fully realized the story's world and characters, who has such perfect command of language and structure, that the story never falters.

The flawed beginning is the only sign in *Swordspoint* that Kushner is young. If it weren't for that lapse, the rest of us writers would have to get together and kill her at once, so we wouldn't have to go through the rest of our careers being compared to her.

I don't usually quote from books I review, but this time I can't resist. Kushner, as an editor, has no doubt longed to write spectacularly nasty rejection slips for a handful of truly bad manuscripts. She indulges herself here, with St Vier's response to a letter he received, offering him a job:

"Thank you for your kind offers. We have enjoyed reading them even more than you intended. Unfortunately, the job in question does not really suit our current needs. We wish you luck with it elsewhere. (Your future

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letters will be returned unopened.]"

It is a testament to Kushner's skill that this little literary in-joke is a key plot point; a kidnapping, a murder, and a capital trial result directly from the sending of this rejection. Even when Kushner is kidding, she means it. Watch this woman — she's going to be one of the great ones.

Prelude to Foundation, Isaac Asimov (Foundation Books/Doubleday, cloth, 402 pp, $18.95)

Isaac Asimov keeps tampering with his own oeuvre, as if he didn't trust his robot stories and novels and the Foundation trilogy to stand the test of time. Why in the world did he feel the need to connect these two completely unrelated series?

His motive doesn't matter. What counts is that Asimov's genius and integrity forbid him to make a botch even of as bad an idea as this one. I never wanted to read about Hari Seldon's arrival on Trantor and the beginning of his career, any more than I wanted to know what happened after the close of the Foundation trilogy. But, just like *Foundation and Earth*, *Prelude to Foundation* is a vital, idea-rich story that asks — and proposes answers to — some of the knottiest problems in ethical philosophy.

I promise that you'll find in this book what Asimov has always given us before: mystery, wit, adventure, and ideas. I also promise that *Prelude* will feel vaguely old-fashioned — Asimov's style and voice were set long before Bester and Ellison and LeGuin. But just because we have Mozart and Beethoven and Satie doesn't mean we should value Bach a minim less; and, if, like Bach, Asimov is writing his best works in a time when they are already artistically out of fashion, we can also be sure that, like Bach, Asimov will transcend fashion to be remembered as one of the greatest in his field — partly because of, and not at all in spite of, his most recent fiction.

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So dive into this book and meet Asimov's usual assortment of unforgettable heroes: Hari Seldon; his lovely and deadly bodyguard, history professor Dors Venabili; a street kid named Raych; the guru of the Trantorian underground, Mother Rittah; a bald pervert named Raindrop Forty-Three; a self-taught mathematician, Yugo Amaryl, struggling to rise out of his untouchable caste; and Rashelle, who modestly aspires to be absolute dictator of only a handful of worlds.

You'll also explore Trantor, which Asimov has made almost as marvelous (and even more plausible) than Niven's Ringworld; you'll find out what became of the elitists of Aurora and all their robots; and, above all, you'll read the "hand-on-thigh story" and discover how psychohistory was finally made practical.

Prelude is going to be a bestseller. It deserves to be.

Barking Dogs, Terence M. Green (St. Martin's, cloth, 214 pp, $15.95)

I wanted to like *Barking Dogs* better than I did. I suppose I was expecting to read the Terence Green of *Ashland, Kentucky* and his other fine and subtle recent works of speculative fiction. Instead, this book is an expansion of a much more traditional science fiction story, a gadget story about a Toronto cop who buys a "barking dog" — a portable and perfect lie detector that allows you to evaluate the honesty of anyone you see or hear, even on television.

Mitch, the cop, uses his new device to begin a spate of vigilante killings, Mitch's way of getting revenge on the criminals who killed his good friend and partner Mario. The difference between Mitch and real-life vigilantes of the lynch-mob variety is that Mitch *knows*, absolutely, that the people he executes are guilty.

The action scenes are excellent, the tension strong. There are only a couple of weaknesses. First, I can't believe that if a perfect lie detector were easily available, it would not have become widespread almost immediately. And because Mitch's relationship with Mario consists only of pretty lame tough-guy banter, which we see only in flashback, I never really came to sympathize with Mitch's crusade.

Still, this slight book is a pretty good cop novel, and because Green is such an honest and perceptive writer, the book transcends its material. It's also Green's *first* novel, and if his novels progress as his stories have, we can look for truly fine books by Terence Green in the near future.

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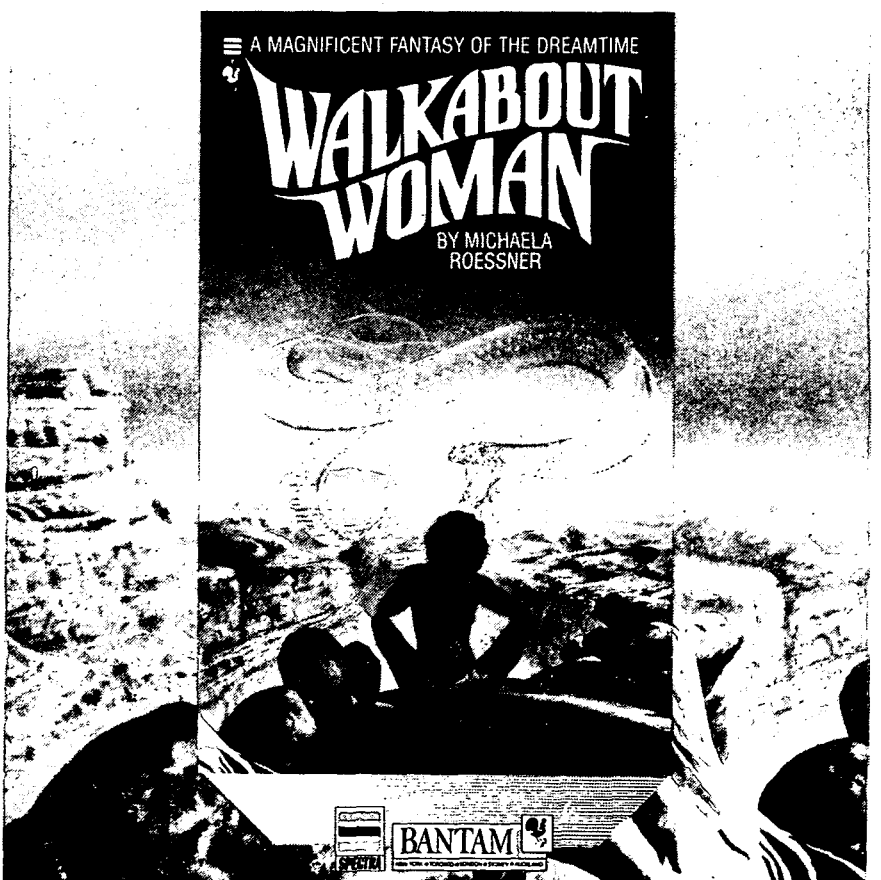
Sometimes the most powerful magic emanates from the gentlest spirit.

Vibrant, rich and endlessly fascinating, Michaela Roessner's WALKABOUT WOMAN is a spellbinding introduction to the magic of Australia—and an astonishing young woman who commands its awesome powers.



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Some of the late Russell Griffin's stories looked at classic SF themes from fresh and unexpected angles: e.g. "The Place of Turnings," (first contact) and "Saving Time" (time travel). "Planesong" is a post-holocaust story from the view of a traffic reporter, and it is as fresh and compelling as anything Mr. Griffin ever wrote.

Planesong

By Russell Griffin

NEVER SAY DIE.

The empty hiss of the radio filled the hangar. She leaned an elbow against the engine cowling, shirtless, scratching, saw the finger streaks across the white of her belly and smeared them away with an oil-black rag from her hip pocket. Last thing she needed was an infection.

The sun, just up, angled a great orange chute of light through the hangar door. How nice it would be to stroll to the runway's end and meet the antiphony of birdcalls from the marsh. Except, it was late, and she had her job. And there were no birds. Maybe they'd come back someday. The flies had, hadn't they?

She reached inside her waistband to scratch lower. Itchier today. Lucky the way things worked out, when you thought about it. How could you raise a kid without birds?

Somehow her vague awareness of the static coalesced into urgency. She struggled against it, but the noise was maddening, and it was crazy

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to waste batteries like that. At last she dropped from the stepladder and clicked across the echoing concrete to the workbench under the square windowpanes gray with grime and cobwebs, dug through the detritus of wrenches, screwdrivers, yellowed newspapers, Jack's *Hustler* (Was that what he'd been thinking of the time they'd made it?), a grease-spotted McDonald's fries box, more and more frantic till she found the damn thing under a soggy spark plug carton where she'd hidden it from herself, hissing from its speaker like a broken steam pipe.

She snapped it off. For a moment the great barrel of air under the curved roof went silent. Thank God. Her arms hung limp; her eyelids drooped.

Hey-hey-hey, it's Brother Mike, your morning man, back with a full plate for you here on WHRT. At 6:45, for all you commuters headed down to the big city, we got our first HRT morning traffic report from our eye-in-the-sky fly-guy, Captain Di in Flight Air-Heart.

Jesus, better hustle. No idea it was that late. After all she'd sacrificed to keep this job. It was crazy to lose it now.

And right on her tail — and it's one tail I sure wouldn't mind being on, lemme tell ya — comes our staff meteorologist Eddy Sweet with the high-up and lowdown on what the old sky's got in store for us. I tell ya, Eddy, to be serious a minute, I wasn't sure this little lady could fill old Al's flight booties, but she's right up there with the best, you know? One of a kind. Why, do you know what that little lady's hobby is?

Back at the plane, she caught a glimpse of herself in the side window as she reached into the cabin to release the brake, thin lips and broad cheeks under untrimmed bangs, the way she used to look when she tagged after her father down into those caves of his. She brushed back a comma of dark brown hair. Crazy Polack, people used to call her. Her mother had been embarrassed for her. *Forget them, Di,* her father had said. *They just wish they had your drive.*

After she'd shouldered the plane clear of the hangar, she chocked the wheels front and rear, and reached in to the bottom of the instrument panel and pushed the mixture-control knob all the way in for a rich seven-to-one mix. Too warm to prime the engine — last thing she needed was a fire in the carburetor.

Spelunking that's what. Know what that is, Eddy?

Exploring caves, isn't it, Mike?

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Try to remember it's the star that's got the answers, Ed. Anyway, some hobby for a pilot, eh? I told her there was a couple of caves I'd like to help her explore, but you know how tongue-tied civilians get around celebrities like me.

Same old Mike, mistaking smut for sophistication. Nobody out there had any idea that rich baritone was coming out of a pinched little face with bad skin and hair greased back, like a rat slinking up onto a table, or that he made the engineer tweak the bass on his microphone. Too bad you could never tell the truth on radio. Once with him was enough.

She cracked the throttle, made sure the switch was off, did a visual check for low tires or wrinkles and fracture signs on the fuselage as she went to the engine compartment for the preflight check. Lead wires tight on both magnetos, no cracks in the heat muff, intake screens clear. She reached up for the prop, eyes sliding down it with practiced skill like a diver slicing into water — no new nicks or stress raisers, spinner secure — and pulled counterclockwise, listening for the sucking that told her the engine was getting fuel. A second pull. Damn shame about the broken starter, but it was hard enough teaching herself mechanics without trying to learn electronics, too. A third. Sounded good.

She ducked back to the cockpit to turn on the switch. If only she had somebody to call out the checklist for her answers, but *c'est la guerre*, or something.

I got a letter here from some guy wanting to know is this Heart Radio or Hart like a deer, you know, Eddy? Beats me, pal. I spent six years in second grade 'cause I didn't want to pass my old man. Just five minutes till Captain Di fills us in — if she was able to get the old rubber band wound up, eh?

She gave the prop a snap. It rocked to a stop without catching. Nothing the second time. But the third, it spun round into a blur, the plane buzzing like a dragonfly trying to shake itself free of a spiderweb as she scurried under the wing to pull the chocks clear, then swung herself into the cockpit. The straps chafed her nipples as she buckled in, and she was surprised to find she still had no shirt. It would be cold up there. She grabbed the blue denim jacket thrown on the seat beside her and tugged it on as she released the brake and pushed the right pedal to circle right, checking the wind sock she'd put up by the overturned oil truck. Almost due north. That meant runway 22.

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She bumped out across the rills of soot and dirt toward the marsh end of the runway, pulling the wheel back a touch so the prop wash would keep the tail down, past the hulk of a corporate Learjet like the carcass of the beluga whale she's seen washed ashore at Cape Ann when she was little, flanks chewed away to expose the bleached white ribs flecked with little berries of flesh dried black. *Why don't you go in and swim, Di!* her father said. *You're not a sissy, are you!*

At the far end, she turned into the wind and ran the engine up to 1,000 RPM for the cockpit check. She made sure the left aileron answered up and the right down when she turned wheel left, wheel right, wheel back and forward, watching the elevators respond. Items ran through her head like the chanted exchanges of a liturgy: trim, flaps, tach, oil temp, suction drop. Run the engine up to 1,800, turn the magneto switch to *R (100-RPM drop)*, then back and over to *L (78-RPM drop)*.

She closed throttle to idle at 500 RPM and pulled on the headset, looking to see if any planes were coming in. Good habits made good fliers.

Naw, she's one of those intense predator types, career, career, you know! Just kidding, Di, if you're listening. Hey, there's this big old cave upstate where they kept Hessians or something in the Revolution, or maybe it was a hideout on the Underground Railroad. What do you say, Di, just you and me, eh!

Hurry up, hurry up. She sighted down the center line of the row of stumps that had been telephone poles, then throttled forward smoothly as she started rolling. As the elevators and rudders started to firm, she used back pressure to lift the nose, a little right rudder to correct for engine torque. The low-frequency rumble through the tires lessened as the nosewheel cleared, faster, faster, then cut out as the rear two lifted.

She loved the rush and rise the way she'd loved probing deep into the earth behind her father, pushing through where lesser spirits got snagged. What was that poem about slipping the surly bonds of earth? She always promised herself to bike to the public library and track down the quote, but whenever she was back down, she was too busy. If you let up even for a minute, you were finished.

So let's pop up and see what our Heart Radio Sweetheart's got to say about traffic. Hey-hey-hey, Di, you going to be the mother of my children!

She unhooked the station mike. "And stick them in day care while I have

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the time of my life every rush hour? I still have a sense of responsibility, Mike."

Is it another guy?

"You figure it out."

Do the cars, Di.

Wheel left and left pedal, applying back pressure as she went into the bank, up just high enough for a glimpse of the clogged turnpike wending its way among shattered smokestacks poking up like broken teeth along the shore, then right aileron and rudder to roll out and streak in low over the dust-swept cartops, motionless as the backs of feeding beetles.

"O.K., Mike, we've got a real parking lot out here this morning from exit 54 all the way into the city. That's a good sixty miles of no-go traffic with everything stopped dead on the load-'em-on ramps, too. No word on what it could be, possibly a big rear-ender fender-bender downstate causing a lot of rubbernecking, but don't expect to hop on Metro North, because I can see the 7:05 stalled on the center rails again today, and traffic lights are out downtown, so it's one big snarl-up. I'm going to scoot over to see if the parkway's any better. This is Diane Trojanowski in Flight Air-Heart, signing off. Back with a bunch in a bit."

See why we never say never say Di here on Heart Radio, folks! Hallelujah, hallelujah! You sure about that cave, Di? It's just crammed with history.

"Maybe I will check it out after all. The boss told me I've been working too hard and I had to take some vacation time."

The things I'll show you. . . .

"I meant alone. I don't go out with guys that have to write multiple alimony checks, Mike."

That got him. How she loved it when she landed a good one without breaking the unwritten rules. Let's see you talk your way around that one for all the fans out there, Brother Mike.

She pulled back on the wheel, dropping the dusty shells of buildings into a featureless gray as she banked away, hunted until the serpentine outline of the parkway emerged from the Brillo of dead scrub, an occasional windshield catching a glint of sun. She pushed down on the wheel and started to descend, the segmented worm of southbound traffic glistening with dew in the stillness beneath the skeletal trees. She'd actually bicycled this far once, hoping, but of course there'd been nothing.

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She noticed the dangling plug. Had she accidentally cut herself off? Had that topper she'd handed Mike been lost? Bewildered, she slipped it back into the panel. With a flash, her head filled with the empty, gut-wrenching hiss, horribly real.

Thank God. How long this time? The lapses were getting worse, no question. Was she going crazy? She glanced out the window to get her bearings. At least she stuck to routine even when she . . . wasn't exactly in control. She took a deep breath to calm herself.

Well, as long as she was up here, it was stupid not to take advantage of the better transmission range. Maybe this time she'd finally raise somebody. She set the transponder to the 7700 emergency code in case anybody was watching on radar out there, then she saw she was holding the old station mike. What the hell was going on? She dropped it onto its hook and grabbed the ship's mike as she tuned for 122.1 megahertz, the old Flight Service Station frequency.

"Anybody, anybody: Cessna six-five; Park City at eight forty-seven; three thousand, two hundred feet; heading two ten. Is anybody out there?"

No response. She pushed REC on the ADF as though she fully expected a beacon out there, then switched the radio to 123.6 and tried again, pulling back on the stick to make the gutted cars smaller and less distinct.

How well she'd gotten to know them from up here in the old days, the ones that inched out of the ramps to hug the right-hand lanes, the ones that jumped their Saabs and BMWs sideways out of line to pass on the right, racing to embrace the boredom of the workday, self-important and unaware they were mere blood cells whose sole importance was in the aggregate, jockeying as though individual position mattered, when they were only circling round and round the same veins and arteries. Now they were black shadows in an X ray, frozen forever inside their vessel walls.

She told herself it was better to have stayed up here above it all, but it still hurt — an unopened door that now was shut forever. It wasn't fair. She was still young; nothing ought to be beyond her reach, not even that marriage Mass her mother had prayed for. The static raged in her ears, but she refused to unplug as the city emerged from the morning mist like a great purple-gray sore, still smoking from random fires in the rubble.

Pure luck she'd taken Mike's advice that day. The moist, calm underground, the stillness she'd known before life got so complicated. She'd even bedded down for the night there.

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But then she'd come up. There was no way to describe it. Hot winds howling and the sky black with smoke, cars smashed all along the roadway, people writhing blindly across the pavement or lying spent and panting. It had happened at rush hour. Rush hour, and she had been a mile underground.

At least she'd had a purpose those first days. The ones caught outside died fast, but others in underground garages and subbasements and bank vaults had seemed O.K. She'd gone up in the plane every day to help direct rescue crews bulldozing cars to clear paths along the highways, hoping to reestablish communications with . . . well, they didn't know. No more than they knew whether it had been a reactor, a neutron bomb, or some secret weapon so fantastic the world at large hadn't dreamed of it yet.

There was no help from Washington, no word at all. Each night they'd gathered around shortwave sets to listen. At first there'd been occasional weak signals, far-off people stunned and babbling about the little they could see from their windows, but these had faded like crickets caught indoors in September, till all was silent. And every day their own numbers had shrunk and shrunk as lesser doses of radiation took their toll, more cars rolling to stops in the spaces they had cleared. She alone had not been doomed. She was the sole witness. She looked down at her fingers. What had she gotten under her nails?

The static beat against her eardrums. She hung up the mike in surrender, but she fought the urge to pull the plug. It was a kind of communication, wasn't it? That was the new world, that was reality, and she would listen to it all the way home. Just in case.

She followed the empty northbound lane of the parkway back toward the airport. Like every other morning, the commuters had been southbound, no northbounders except mothers chauffeuring kids to school or day care. Again, lucky. How would it feel to know her baby was sprawled in some cinder-block nursery school under a wash of radioactive silt? Better alone and unfettered.

She thought of the year her parents moved south and she spent the summer snipping the models in coats and swimsuits and girdles out of the catalog and pasting them in a scrapbook and giving them names like they were friends. She had sworn to live so she never needed others that way again.

She looked down at the husks of cars. She'd read once where they'd

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Now the whole world looked like one giant museum. And she was curator, guard and sole attendee.

poured concrete over a bunch of old cars at the foot of a parking lot somewhere in Connecticut, supposed to be a work of art or a playground or something. Now the whole world looked like that, one giant museum. And she was curator, guard and sole attendee.

Fingers trembling, she reached for the plug.

Her heart almost stopped. Something had moved down there. The least flash of yellow in the corner of her eye, like a flame flickering through the leafless branches, swerving right to avoid a blasted pickup, then shooting forward.

A car. Another human being! She banked sharply up and around, catching a second glimpse of yellow as the car negotiated a corner and seemed to speed up.

"Stop!" she shouted at the windshield. "Why are you running away?"

She pushed the wheel down and swooped in recklessly, saw it clearly for the first time. A little yellow Honda, just zipping into the Meadowside Road underpass. It flashed beneath her as she pulled up to avoid the bridge, but it didn't come out the other side as she swung back. He'd stopped in there. He was hiding. Why hadn't he come out to wave her in? Wasn't he lonely, too? She slowed almost to a stall and circled again slowly. Maybe he already had somebody. No, the odds were against it. And anyway, that wouldn't explain why he was hiding from her.

Then she realized — she was frightening him. Maybe he thought she was the enemy, or maybe he was just afraid of anything coming from the sky. It was crazy, but he'd have to be a little crazy after all this. Wasn't she a little crazy, too? But how sad to tremble in the dark like a rabbit under the shadow of a hawk, afraid of the glorious sky.

She wanted to put the damn plane down. She checked both sides of the parkway, but it was all ranch houses perched on hillsides, one of those one-acre-minimum subdivisions where the land was all perpendiculat. No place to land unless she were willing to risk losing the plane, and she couldn't do that. The plane was the key to survival.

She circled again, wagging her wings to reassure him. If only she had that old smoke generator on board, but the FAA had made her take

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it out if she wanted to carry passengers.

"Stay there," she begged. "Don't leave till I get back."

She left the earphones plugged in all the way back, checking every frequency in case he had any kind of radio. He didn't. It was a struggle to stay calm once she'd landed, but she stuck to postflight routine and didn't go for her bicycle till the plane was ready for tomorrow.

The bicycle was one she'd found on its side under the rack in front of the terminal. It was the only way to travel on the ground. Not because of fuel, though she fretted she'd soon empty the tanks and have to leave Stilborne for another airport. No, it was that a bicycle could be walked around the worst jam-ups, or even over them.

So why had he been tooling around in a Honda?

She pushed off and pedaled past the silhouettes in uncharred paint of the airport personnel preserved in mid-bustle against the blackened face of the terminal building, down the long airport road that had once run between the whispering phragmite and swamp grass, now swept clear on both sides, glinting black where the oily water oozed amongst the hummocks of seared root, then right by the gas station and out along Howard Avenue toward the parkway.

The Honda had to have come from a narrow range of parkway exits on either side of where she'd seen it. There was no way he could maneuver much farther.

She tried to keep her eyes straight ahead as she passed beside the dusty carcasses of cars. So much less painful to fly above it, and you didn't have to breathe through your mouth to mask the stench from the flesh and black-flecked bone in the car seats or taste the gummy residue on your tongue.

But sometimes your eyes strayed down inside the cars.

She shuddered and angled up across the median, dried grass crackling like fire under her tires, then down into the northbound lane. Wouldn't she have had a lot to say about this in the old days? *There's some crazy lady on a bicycle down there pedaling against the traffic. . . .* She caught herself, concentrated on the ride.

It was then she noticed what she'd been missing from the air. A blush of green was beginning to show beneath the blackened mulch of grass and leaves. Moss furred the rocks of the highway cut. Life was beginning again.

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It had to be a sign. He'd understood her wing-wagging, and she'd find him waiting in the shadows of the underpass, and he would swing his long legs out of the car door and stand up impossibly tall and handsome as she pedaled up, and they would not even speak — she would run to him, and he would take her, the woman who'd soared so high, right there on the roadside.

But something wasn't right. The grass blades curved up and flattened into unfamiliar shapes, like swollen soup spoons blistered by black goiters. Tendrils purplish red as birthmarks corkscrewed from under the wash of black and broken branches like tentacles of some underground monster groping its way toward the cars. It was the same on all the southern exposures facing the blast.

She pedaled harder, eyes on the pavement, and she did not look up again until the incline told her she was close to the gray stone shoulder of Meadowside Road overpass. She slowed to a stop. The opening yawned black before her except for the glowing mote of a fly catching the sunlight as it flew under the arch. It was a little, well, frightening. Who knew what was in there? She reminded herself how it was like the cave that had saved her life. Sure, and he must have survived because he'd been in some kind of cave, too. No wonder he'd ducked into this one when he felt threatened.

She paused, a hand on the abutment.

"Hello?"

Hello, an echo answered, empty, damp.

She stepped tentatively into the dark and waited for her eyes to adjust. The fly buzzed invisibly somewhere nearby. A large shape loomed before her, sharply outlined against the brilliant semicircle of daylight at the far entrance, but as she approached, she could see it was too long and high and American. The broad hood and shark fins of an ancient Chrysler. She took another step, and all at once a swarm of flies rose from the shattered windows like steam and circled angrily above the car. She gagged and spun away.

If only she'd tried to land instead of playing it safe. What happened to the way she used to take risks? A glint of slickness caught her eye, a wet spot on the pavement. Oil from the Honda? She touched her finger to it and sniffed. Damn, just water dripping from a crack in the concrete vault above like lime oozing from a stalactite.

She went back outside, eyes burning, and stared down the empty high-

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way, searching the slopes on either side. Which way did you go to find a person with a world to hide in? You didn't. You waited for him to come back. She squatted with her back against the cold stone of the abutment.

But he did not come back, and when the eastern edge of the sky began to bruise and darken, she got up to go home. Could he have been a hallucination? She'd known the loneliness was getting to her. Hadn't there been studies of isolation, people dreaming while they were awake, seeing things and all? No — she wasn't that far gone. He'd been real enough. But the only way to find him was to keep a clear head and use the resources she had. That meant the plane; she'd go up and look for him every day as long as there was fuel and the engine held out. Never say die.

Pedaling back in the failing light, she passed the time by reading the tread streaks on the pavement. Each set told the story of accidents she'd reported in her other life.

Two black lines leading to the tangled steel cable and broken post, then two furrows through the charred leaves straight to the trunk of a leafless hemlock. One-car accident, lost control on a curve in a light rain, car on fire and traffic backed up two miles to the exit 24 load-'em-on ramp, with fire and rescue vehicles fighting to get through with the Jaws of Life to cut him out. Probable fatality.

A pair of intermittent skid marks in a black *S* cut short in the middle of a lane, short, straight marks stacked up behind. High-speed skid to avoid a disabled vehicle stopped in the left lane, collision and chain-reaction rear-ender fender-bender pileup of following cars, two-hour backup.

Back at the airport, she heated a can of green beans and rewarmed her morning coffee over a can of Sterno — it was getting harder and harder to find ones that weren't all gummy and dried-up inside — glancing out expectantly into the darkness every so often. How many times might he have watched her passing overhead without her knowing? Was it possible he was out there now?

She brought her food inside to the little room she'd made in the sub-basement of the terminal. It was dank but safe, and the well was there. She kept it immaculate as a counterpoint to the monotony of chaos outside. Here she could have an effect. When she was done, she rocked in the rocking chair the PR director had used for his fused disk, flipping the pages of a fireworks catalog she'd found in the security office.

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Entertaining herself on the ground had been hard. Audio- and videotapes were garbled. She guessed there were books around that hadn't been pulped by leaking roofs and missing walls, but she'd never been much of a reader, just skimming the people articles in magazines in doctors' offices and now even these were a disappointment — so innocent and unprepared, their world so alien. She couldn't even recognize the celebrities in the photos without checking the captions.

But catalogs had always been different. Wish-books, her father had called them. They were pure potential, invitations to join the same attractive, forgettable people recurring on page after page, now in spring hats and lacy bras, pretending to watch TVs, admiring table saws, cat clocks with eyes that went back and forth in time to their flickering tails, baby angels and toadstools that were night-lights.

In fact, she had no interest in fireworks, but at least she hadn't seen this one before, and she followed the happy dad and son and daughter in thin, cheesy colors oohing and aahing over successions of firecrackers and roman candles fanned out like playing cards — the Jumbo Rocket Assortment, the Uncle Sam, the Improved Yankee Doodle, and the Grand Finale. If only she had some now to loft into the night sky to say: Screw you; we're still here.

If anyone was out there. That was why survivors had listened every night, afraid yet hoping for clipped, military transmissions in an unfamiliar language. Even if they *were* waiting out there like ghouls for the last heartbeat to stop before they sailed in to make everything their own without spilling a drop of their blood, it would have meant other living humans.

She shivered and rose to banish her worries by getting back into the routine. She heaved the cover off the well, filled her plastic bucket, and lugged it to the funnel and shower head she'd rigged. After she'd found him, they would set up something more permanent with a pump and generator, have real showers Together.

The long, syrupy drops were painfully cold, but it kept infection down and washed off any radioactive dust. And he'd like her better this way. Partway through, she suddenly got the crazy idea somebody was watching her, and she couldn't shake it. She toweled off quickly and got into bed, her skin still sticky. She left the radio on, hissing live static.

Time for that old Birthday Salute, ladies and germs, and of course

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coming up in this half hour. Heart Radio's one and only Captain Di with her first update on the traffic for all you commuters. We know how you hang on her every word!

The voice cut through her sleep. A last corner of her brain knew dully that the batteries had died in the night, begged her not to forget her search, but her mind was already scabbing over. She rose numbly, scratched, and pulled on pants, her eyes heavy. Outside, she siphoned the gas, ran her standard check, then chocked the wheels and flipped the propeller four times before it caught and she could pull herself into the cockpit for the litany of the checklist. The engine thrummed.

And then she was rolling down the runway. She imagined the disks of her wheels spinning faster and faster, then slowing as the ground fell away, till they hung like twin moons beneath the plane.

Say, Lady Di, you out there? Are you named for that goddess of hunting?

She was goddess of childbirth, too.

What do you know about it, Ed? I looked it up last night, and she was this virgin that had some guy torn apart by his own dogs 'cause he saw her naked.

"Then I'd better not catch you outside the window again, Mike." Gotcha.

If you're here to do the cars, why don't you do them?

"We've got another sixty-mile maxi-slow-mover with everything backed up from exit 1, but don't jump off onto the Post Road or the parkway till I get back with word on whether they're open. I've never seen anything like this. Back in a bit with a bunch, Mike."

She noticed the dangling plug and held it in her palm. How had that happened? What would the FAA say?

She eased it in. Her head exploded with angry static; her eyes opened wider. How long this time? She glanced at the gauges. At least she had fuel for a partial sweep. She was already in a steep bank away from the knotted highway, and she let the plane keep going. She looked down at the neat gray checkerboard of lawns and houses. Could he be right below her somewhere? What if he'd lived here . . . with someone else? Another woman?

So say he had. She wasn't there now. Nobody down there in suburbia except a few holdouts like her mother rotting in their shiny kitchens. No,

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his woman would have been caught like all the rest behind the wheel of a compact between home and work.

But she wasn't going to see much this high up, especially if he were as fearful at home as he'd been on the parkway. He'd have the Honda camouflaged from the air. She set the carburetor heat on, throttled back to idle, and held the nose level to glide in, running the *RPM* up to 1,500 for every two hundred feet of descent to clear the engine, the heavier air whistling against the cabin until it was drowned out by the laboring engine as she opened the throttle to level off.

Empty, even the driveways. Wait a minute — a bit of yellow through the trees. This time she wouldn't play it safe. She'd land and run to him, and everything could start again, and they'd fill the country against all those marines waiting for both of them to die.

But even as she banked around and came in lower, she realized what it was. A child's yellow wading pool blown over like the back of a turtle. It bobbed in the prop wash as she pulled up.

The parkway was in sight now. She ran her hand along the wire from her headset to the panel, caught a glimpse of her fingernails. They were a purplish brown with dried blood. Her hand closed around the plug. If she pulled it out this time, she might never find the way back.

But just as her fingers closed around the plug, she sensed movement below her. It was real this time, for God's sake, guttering like a candle flame way along the northbound lane as though he were returning from wherever he'd gone yesterday.

Madly, she swooped in on him, wagging her wings.

"Look at me up here, will you? Please, please stop."

The car pulled away in a cloud of black exhaust smoke. She'd have to give him some help with that engine, because he was obviously one of those all-thumbs types when it came to mechanics. Kind of sweet, in a way.

She pulled up a little. There was a big open space off her right wing she hadn't noticed yesterday, maybe an old golf course, more than enough room to put down. And he'd see her and follow, recognizing her intentions; and he would pull the dusty Honda to a stop at the edge of the blackened fairway to watch her spectacular three-point landing; and she would hop off the wing, maybe leaving her denim jacket open just enough to give him a glimpse — she'd always despised that kind of come-on, but did Eve worry about style in Eden?

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All at once she was aware of a ridge rushing at her. She pulled back into a steep climb, flashing up into the morning sunlight and the nicest loop you could ever want to see, upsy-daisy and around. Talk about male birds performing to get the female's attention!

But he wasn't looking. He was going faster and faster like a maniac, drifting around a corner on two wheels.

"Don't be afraid," she whispered into the mike. "I need you!"

And she would go to him, and his arms would close around her, and they would look into each other's eyes because it had been so long since either had seen another pair of eyes, and he would bend his head to press his lips against hers, and she would feel his erection against her belly, and she would pull him down right there on the green where days ago they would never have dreamed, and she would lower herself on him. Everything was going to be whole again, marriage absolute and eternal.

He swerved to avoid a convertible with a tattered bat's wing of burned roof, and she barely pulled up in time to clear another wall of trees. He had to be doing over eighty. How could she get through to him? In the old days, every word she said went out to drivers the length of the freeway, and now directly on top of a single car, and it was like they were in different worlds.

She came in again, eyes gleaming, knuckles white on the wheel. He went faster.

He never gave any indication he tried to stop, just drove straight into the overpass abutment like a windup toy plowing into a table leg, lurched back onto his rear springs in slow motion, doors flying open, bumper skipping away, a wheel bouncing off, and then everything disintegrated in a ball of flame.

She banked into a holding pattern. Funny, she thought. All the time she'd covered traffic, she'd always followed the slow-ups, listened to the police radio to track down the accidents after the fact. She'd never seen one happen right below her.

Quietly, she eased the plug out, circling slowly, mournfully, the silence tinkling like Mass bells.

"We're over the cause of that rubber-necking, Mike," she said. "It's a one-car collision with a bridge abutment, and I'm afraid we've got a fatality. No rescue personnel on the scene yet, so you commuters have a real wait ahead of you. Matter of fact, looks like this one could take forever to clear away."

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In magic, as in all else, adventure is what happens when things go wrong. And things often go wrong when dealing with demons . . .

The Malice of the Demon

By Marion Zimmer Bradley

THE LIFE OF a mercenary-magician is fraught with adventure . . . always remembering that, in the old definition, adventure is what happens when things go wrong, especially in the field of magic.

This adventure befell, then, early in Lythande's career — time is irrelevant in the career of a magician (for Lythande has lived at least three ordinary lifetimes) — but let us say it took place in her first lifetime, soon after the Blue Star had appeared between her brows.

Lythande, at the time of this adventure, was in the city of Old Gandrin, and to her lodging, by night, there came then a lady, wrapped in a dark cloak, who looked upon the magician and said, with an air of hostility that Lythande did not understand, "Are you the great magician Lythande?"

"I am Lythande," said the magician.

This befell soon after Lythande had assumed her male disguise, and she was still lacking in some of its refinements; so the woman's look of scorn worked on her sorely when she said, "I came here without my bodyguards."

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"You have no need to fear me, Lady," Lythande said.

"I wish this visit to remain forever secret," she said.

"It will not be told by me, Lady," Lythande said.

"Still," said the lady, "you will swear an oath never to reveal this visit; you will swear an oath to be silent even though I myself should implore you to speak."

"If you wish, I will swear," said Lythande. "Yet Your Majesty should consider well; for even I have wished that time should run backward and my words be unspoken."

"Be silent," commanded the queen, for it was she. "Do you dare to compare your resolve with my own? I have thought long and carefully before seeking you out. I need your services because, though much magic is known to me, I have not the art of summoning demons. But first you shall swear."

"I will swear it if you wish," Lythande repeated. "But, as I said, there are many evil chances in the world, and it may well be that Your Majesty has not reckoned upon the malice of the demon kind, for they will use your own words to destroy you."

"Be silent," repeated the queen, an aging woman with the remains of really remarkable beauty. "I know of you, Lythande; you, too, have secrets that you do not wish spoken aloud; for instance. . . ."

"If you wish, I will swear," said Lythande; and then and there she bound herself with a great oath that while time ran and the Twin Suns stood in the heavens, she would not speak, no matter who, even the queen herself, should bid her to do so. Nor would she reveal, by glance or by hint or by any other means whatever, that she had so much as looked upon the queen's face. "So be it; it is done," said Lythande. "But I implore Your Majesty — for there are many evil chances in the world, and it may come that you should wish that time should run backward and your request be unspoken — not to ask this. I cannot make time to run backward, or Your Majesty —"

"You quibble with me, Lythande, and that I will not have; summon now the demon, for I would that time should indeed run backward and restore to me that beauty I have lost, for I would once again have all men at my feet."

"I feared that," Lythande said, "and I implore Your Majesty not to ask this; for Your Majesty has not reckoned with the malice of the demonkind indeed; they will twist your words, and use your own request to destroy you."

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"Do you think you know more of magic than I?" the queen asked haughtily. "Or can you restore to me my lost beauty?"

"Lady, I cannot; the gods themselves have seen fit to deprive you of youth and of that beauty that comes from youth alone. Yet, there is a beauty that comes of age and wisdom, and to that end I may serve you." She was still too unpracticed in the ways of a courtier to say that time had in no way affected the lady's beauty, and the queen scowled. Lythande found it politic to say, "You are beautiful indeed, my lady. Yet, if you will be guided by me, that beauty alone that comes of age and wisdom is fit for a woman to desire. . . ."

"Be silent," repeated the queen, "lest I lose patience and, when I am done, bid the demon to rid me of you. For I do indeed desire my lost youth and beauty."

"Be it so," said Lythande. "Never name that well from which you will not drink. And now. . . ."

Lythande thereupon lighted a certain incense, inscribed a magical circle, and desired the queen to disrobe and take her place within it. Then she performed the required chants and circumambulations, the air in the room first clouded, then swirled and grew opaque, and within the circle there materialized a singularly ugly demon.

"It is done," said Lythande. "The demon is here to serve you. Yet I implore Your Majesty to beware of what words you use to ask your boon."

"Not a word," commanded the queen, making a certain gesture; at which the demon said, wincing, "I am here to serve you."

"I have pondered this long and well," said the queen. "Bid time to return; make me as beautiful as I ever was, place me at the moment of my greatest beauty, with all of my life before me."

"So be it," said the demon, and gestured, and the elderly frame of the queen began to waver a little; then there was a great blaze of light, and where the body of the old woman had been, a beautiful girl baby lay unswaddled upon the hearth.

Lythande said, "That is not what she asked."

"How can you say so?" growled the demon. "The moment of her greatest beauty is, after all, a matter of opinion; and she cannot say she has not all her life before her."

"True," said Lythande.

"Dismiss me," said the demon. Lythande gestured; the demon vanished.

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The queen was venting her rage and frustration in screams; but as she had not yet learned to talk, she could only cry, as babies do. Lythande, in whose life there was no room for an infant, swathed her in a cloak, and carried her to one of the pious sisterhoods whose business it was to care for the unwanted babes of the city.

Gandrin was all agog with the disappearance of the queen, but when they inquired of Lythande whether she knew anything of it, Lythande was of course forced by the oath she had sworn to say nothing. Yet she found it politic to leave Old Gandrin, and did not return there for many years.

As for the queen, she had not forgotten her powers, and, as soon as she learned to talk, she tried to claim them; but it is well known that babes sometimes say such things and that unregarded orphans claim to be queens; so no one paid any attention to her.

And in time she forgot all about it, as children do.

"Obviously, our people have the lesser species well trained."

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Shermie Brooks is a pathetic youth living in a world gone badly awry, a world in which survival itself is a matter of conditioning. But in such a world, even the proper response can be, at times, sadly wrong.

Conditioning

By John M. Landsberg

"YOU AIN'T NEVER gonna do that again, are ya, Shermie?"

Shermie Brooks dragged the back of his arms across his face where it was sore. Some blood leaked out of his nose and messed his sleeve. He tried to rub it off, but it only smeared worse. Mom would be pretty mad at him for getting that blood there, but after she was mad, she probably would give him a little kiss on the tip of his nose to make it all better, and maybe she'd even let him have a choco-chip cube, if they still had some left this month. His stomach grumbled more than usual, just from thinking about that.

He squinted up at Gritch, who was making a mean face. Gritch looked kind of swirly because there was a lot of water in Shermie's eyes.

"No, Gritch," Shermie said. "No, I won't. I won't never do that again."

Gritch smiled, a big smile with his mouth, but his eyes still looked kind of mean. His mouth had some brown teeth and some black spaces in between. "That's real good, Shermie," he said real slow, and when he was

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saying it, he was making Shermie's pocket knife jump and down in his hand the same slow way he was talking. Four words, four jumps.

Gritch rubbed his thumb on the side of the knife. "This is a real nice one," he said. A long time ago maybe the knife had some paint on it, but that was all scraped off now. "Yeah," Gritch said, "real neat. You shouldn'ta tried to keep it away from me."

Shermie stood up slow, and then hunched over, so Gritch wouldn't get mad from looking up at him. "Now, Gritch?"

"Now."

"Thanks for — for letting me give you my pocket knife, Gritch."

Gritch tilted back his head and laughed real loud. "What did I tell you, Sly?"

Shermie looked at Sly, who was standing there with Gritch. Sly had greasy hair that made Shermie kind of sick to look at it. Sly chuckled and stuck his thumbs in his pants pockets. "You said it, Gritch. You got him trained real good."

"Yeah," Gritch said. He pulled out the blade, which was the only blade that was still left in the knife, and he waved it up and down and sideways like a litle sword. The point of the blade was broken off. "I got him, you know, *conditioned*." He laughed again. "That's what. Conditioned." He folded the blade inside again and stuck the knife in his back pocket. "C'mon, I'm starvin' to death; let's go see who we can get some ration cards off of."

Gritch and Sly walked away slow, kind of rocking their shoulders from side to side. "That's really somethin'," Sly said. "He gonna be like that all his life? Ain't he never gonna get any smarter?"

The way Sly said that — it made a kind of hot feeling shoot up in Shermie's chest. "Gritch!" he yelled.

Gritch and Sly stopped walking and turned around.

"I *am* gonna get smarter. Someday I'll be smarter."

Gritch made a mean face again. "Did I hear you *actually* raise your voice at me?" he said, in a real nasty way.

"No, Gritch," Shermie said. Now look what he did. Gritch was gonna get mad again, which made Shermie kind of scared. "I didn't raise my voice. Really. I — I just didn't remember — I didn't remember how old — I just wanted to remember how old you said I hafta be to keep my own things."

Gritch smiled. "I said when you turn forty, and don't ask me one

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more time." He went walking away again. He laughed some more.

"O.K., Gritch," Shermie called. "I won't ask you that."

Shermie rubbed his knee, which felt sore from bonking on the ground when Gritch hit him. His face was scrunched up because he was trying to think. He was thinking he could remember what Gritch said before, so he wouldn't have to ask Gritch anymore. Before, Gritch said he could keep his own things when he was thirty-nine, *and* Gritch said when he was thirty-eight, and maybe — yeah, Gritch definitely said when he was twenty — he could definitely remember that — maybe. But how could that be right? Because Gritch just now said when he was forty. Yeah. When he was forty, Gritch would let him keep his own things. It wasn't time for him to keep his own things. He wasn't smart enough. He shouldn'ta tried to keep the knife.

Shermie turned around and went walking the other way. He scraped his feet over the sidewalk cracks and pushed his feet sideways around all the big holes, except sometimes he stepped down in the holes for fun. He was going the way to his private place, a place that Gritch didn't even know about.

Gritch don't know about it, he thought. But right away when he thought that, his stomach got sick, and his breathing got going too fast. This was the first time he ever thought how Gritch didn't know about his private place. Maybe Gritch would be angry if he knew. Maybe Gritch would beat him up again.

But that couldn't be right. This was a *place*, not a *thing*. So that was O.K. Because how could he give it to Gritch? He couldn't give a *place* to Gritch; he couldn't anyway. A place just had to always stay where it was.

His breathing got O.K. then, and he kept walking. He sniffled a little because he could feel some blood trying to come out from his nose, and he didn't want some to come out, because that would make him think about Gritch taking his knife, and he didn't want to think about that. He wished Gritch would let him keep something, like maybe his rabbit's foot. That rabbit's foot was pretty neat. Why didn't he let him keep his rabbit's foot, or that beat-up piece of leather? Well, O.K., so leather was super special *real* hard to find, he knew that, so for sure he couldn't keep some leather. And so what about the rabbit's foot? He didn't care about the rabbit's foot anyway, because it was older than he was, and Mom said there weren't rabbits around anywhere since about the twenties, which was longer ago than he could even think about.

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He went through the alley, kept going down a dirt road, and kept going more until there weren't even any trees, just lots of dirt all around. He liked it out here, not in the city, because he didn't like trees anyway. He didn't like the way the leaves clicked when it was windy. In the winter, it wasn't so bad, because the leaves had snow on them, so they didn't blow around and click so much. Mom said the way it used to be was that the leaves would fall off the trees before the snow came, but Shermie couldn't figure out how that could be true, unless maybe they used to have crummier glue for holding the leaves on, a long time ago.

It was a whole lot of walking, and then he got to the rocks that were the front of his private place. He squeezed between two of the rocks and looked around. His private place was pretty big, bigger than even about ten or a hundred living cubicles like the cubicle that was his and Mom's, and his private place didn't have anything in it except dirt, and nothing around it except rocks, and nothing over it except regular brown sky. The thing was, he could be in it without Gritch or anybody.

He walked around a little bit and said, "This is my private place," and that made him smile some. He pushed his feet in the dirt when he walked. Then he stopped and got down on the ground, got down flat on his back, and he looked up at the sky and opened up his hands flat, and patted his hands up and down on the ground. He could feel the dirt puff out under his hands when he patted it. "Well," he said, kind of quiet, "here I am."

He patted the ground some more, and after he patted it enough, he said, "Well, what do you think? I think maybe now it's time to climb the big rock. O.K. That sounds good."

One thing he liked to do was climb up on the tallest rock and look at the city, which was exciting to look at from there because it was very far away, which he could tell because he almost couldn't see the city with so much air in the way. And then he would pretend he was the king of the whole city, and he owned it all, and he was so many years old that Gritch would really let him keep it.

But he didn't get to climb up the rock this time because something funny happened. Some kind of tickly tingly feelings jumped around on his neck and his back, and that made him turn around, which was when he saw something that wasn't supposed to be in his private place, but it was. It was a big giant ball, like the little one Mom used for sticking all her pins and needles in, but this was a giant one that filled up almost his whole

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private place, and it had a million zillion giant needles sticking out from it.

There was a thing in front of the ball that looked kind of like — like something he saw in a picture once — like a *dog*, that's what, a dog, except different. He couldn't remember for sure — did a dog have lots of arms, and was it painted all over with lots of colors? Mom said dogs were nice, real nice. She said she wished she had one if only they still had some in the world. She said they used to call them a name like somebody's best friend.

This dog thing was holding a little box, and it was waving one arm at Shermie. Maybe it wanted to give him the box, but why would it? It sure was a strange thing with its strange giant ball, but that wasn't so strange as that somebody would for real want to give him something. But if that was what it wanted, to give the box to him, maybe he better take it. Maybe if he didn't take the box, the dog thing would get mad like Gritch.

So he went and got over there and stuck out his hand. The dog thing put the box in his hand and waved all its arms a lot. It turned around about five times fast — real, real fast — and some weird sounds came out from it, and then it kind of slipped inside a hole in the giant ball that wasn't there before. Then the hole in the ball got smaller and smaller and wasn't there anymore, and the giant ball went up in the air fast and went in the clouds, and Shermie couldn't see it anymore.

"Huh!" he said.

Then he looked at the box. It had about a million buttons on it. He pressed one, and what do you know? Some soft green stuff pushed up from the dirt in his private place, all around him and even under his feet, too. It was like a green rug, but it had a smell that he couldn't figure out. He bent over and rubbed his hands on it, and it was made from lots of little pieces all glued to the ground, sort of like the grass in the park, except different, because these pieces were soft and they bent when he touched them. Plus, the grass in the park sure didn't have a smell like this. The grass in the park didn't have any smell. But this green stuff smelled. It smelled kind of good.

"Huh!" he said again. He pressed another button, and big green sticks jumped up from the ground. They were taller than the top of his head, and they had long green leaves sticking off that bent over, and they smelled a little bit like something he had smelled a couple of times, which was corn.

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But this wasn't corn, because where were the cans that had little yellow cubes in them to eat?

He shrugged. This was sure a strange box. He pressed another button, and that one made the green rug rip open in some places, and some trees jumped up, but he couldn't figure out how they did it because he didn't see anybody building them. And these trees didn't have only green leaves. They also had a lot of round, shiny balls that were red hanging on the branches. He never saw things like that on a tree. He went over to see them better, and they had a smell, too — a *real* good smell, kind of prickly and cold in his nose. It made him feel tingly, and kind of like he wanted to smile, and — and it made him feel even *more* hungry, too. That smell made him feel more hungry, but why would it? He never ate anything like those red things, but gosh, he was sure hungry now. Maybe Mom would give him something to eat if he went home right now and asked real nice, even if it wasn't time for today's meal.

But even if Mom didn't give him something to eat now, this wasn't such a bad day after all. Now he had a box that made stuff, which was pretty neat stuff even if he didn't know what it all was, and it all made him feel good, and there was still lots of other buttons left to push.

His nose itched, so he scratched it, and some blood dropped out and made a spot on the box. And he looked at the blood spot that was on the box, and he thought, Oh no, that's not my box. I have to give it to Gritch. Because I am *conditioned.* He didn't know what that meant, but he remembered when Gritch said it — he remembered all about what was happening then, and all of a sudden he didn't like to hear it in his head the way Gritch said it. All of a sudden he didn't like it at all.

He felt funny inside his stomach, but not hungry like all the time, and not sick like a lot of times, but some other funny feeling he never had before, kind of like getting punched real hard. And that funny feeling was making his breathing go too fast, and his eyes felt kind of burning like they wanted to cry, and his teeth were grinding like they were mad — real mad at Gritch. Which was scary and wasn't good because he wasn't allowed to ever be mad at Gritch. But all he could think was, it was the worst thing ever if Gritch took the box, because this box was maybe the specialest thing he ever had, and maybe he wouldn't ever be old enough or smart enough if Gritch took away something this special. And he didn't like to feel so scared and so mad, but when he thought about Gritch

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owning this box, he got more scared and more mad, like there was even something else wrong with Gritch just even having the box, but he didn't know what it was, and it scared him even more to think something like that, something that he didn't even understand why he was thinking it. And he was really crying then because he didn't know how to stop being so scared.

He put the box down on the ground, and he picked up the biggest rock he could find, and he smashed the box, and smashed and smashed, and then it was just a bunch of very, very tiny pieces. And then he made a hole in the dirt and stuck all the pieces in. And he wouldn't ever, ever, tell anybody about it. Because then Gritch wouldn't ever even know about the box, and if he didn't know about it, then it didn't count the same way as trying to keep it and not give it to Gritch.

Which was maybe cheating a little, so it made him feel a little bad.

But he wasn't scared anymore. And he wasn't crying. He thought maybe he felt kind of good.

Kind of like — like he had done something real special.

Kind of like maybe he really was old enough now. And smart enough, maybe he was really smart enough now, because he had figured out how it could be that Gritch wouldn't have the box, but he wasn't keeping it away from Gritch. He must of been real smart to figure that out.

So he even smiled a little bit when he started walking away from the trees and stuff in his private place, which he thought maybe he wouldn't go back to again, because it was different and scary now, but he didn't have to think about it if he didn't look at it again, and he could find another private place anyway.

But there was one more thing he thought, one more thing he thought for sure when he was running back home, and it was this:

The next neat thing he found, the very next one, he was gonna keep it.

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 31: *In Which the Li'l White Lies Thesis (Part Three) Approaches a Nascent State, Approaches the Dreadful Door, and En Route Questions Meat Idolatry.*

BEING LIED to. Selling inferior goods by duping up with assertions that said grubby goods have "phantom values" apart from what we see on the screen: *The Emerald Forest* supposedly based on a true story; *Ladyhawke* a retelling of medieval legends; *Hangar 18* revealing suppressed Air Force knowledge of UFOs; lies, every one of them. Lures, cynically dangled.

Being lied to. Promoting films of rape, violence, ethical debasement, moral turpitude, inhuman behavior, sexism with prolonged graphic representations in adoring closeup, and then justifying it by wide-eyed explanation that "we show you this woman having an icepick driven into her eye to show you how much we *dis*approve of it." Exploitation, pandering to the debased nature of the contemporary audience, feeding the sickness. Rationalizing and justifying and excusing . . . with lies.

Being lied to. Using the ignorance of the audience against itself. Telling us that by coloring stylish black-and-white films like *Casablanca* and *The Maltese Falcon*, they offer them to a generation of young viewers who won't go to a movie if it isn't in color. Denying to that generation the experience of seeing such *objets d'art* as they were intended to be seen. Producing by such corruption of the audience a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the ignorant are *kept* ignorant, in the sense of uneducated.

Being lied to. As we examined such misrepresentation last time, through the nothus practice of plagiarism. Parvenus and no-talents, rampant in the film industry, incapable of creating the work them-

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selves, hungering for sinecures as directors and producers while condemning writers to the beanfield labor of actually doing the screenplay and then having it wrested from them so they can "reinterpret." Unabashedly stealing ideas and concepts and entire screenplays, recasting them in their own cliche-riddled manner, and sending them out to market, to an audience with either short memories or no memories. If you have seen the Clint Eastwood film *Pale Rider* and are not deeply infuriated at it . . . then you are the ignorant of whom I speak. And if you look bewildered at that remark, and your attitude turns rancid against he who points out that you are cerebrose in this matter, then I suggest you go and rent videocassettes of that film and *Shane*. And if you do not perceive very quickly that *Pale Rider* is a shameless, awful ripoff of the A.B. Guthrie-Jack Sher adaptation of Jack Schaefer's exquisite novel (combined with a ripoff of the "ghost" element from the 1972 Eastwood vehicle *High Plains Drifter*, written by Ernest Tidyman), then you are dumber than I think. And you deserve no better than rudeness, because your ignorance only permits this evil to flourish.

So let us consider two recent films that may or may not be ripoffs of famous science fiction stories. Two films that did extremely well at the box-office, and have been lauded as fresh and original ideas by critics utterly unaware of the vast body of sf material that has been fueling the engines of film thieves for fifty years. Two films that take the basic ideas already existent in sf stories, simplify them, render them in much cruder form, and deny to the original authors the ability ever to have *their* work translated to the screen.

The first is THE RUNNING MAN (Taft Entertainment/Keith Barish Productions) and the second is THE HIDDEN (New Line Cinema).

In the Los Angeles *Daily News* of 13 November 87, a gentleman named Michael Healy, who is identified as "Daily News Film Critic," says this of *The Running Man*:

"Schwarzenegger stumbles and falls flat in this futuristic satire on TV games shows with a plot lifted from Richard Connell's story 'The Most Dangerous Game." Stephen King did the lifting under the name Richard Bachman, and Steven de Souza turned it all into a screenplay about as original as a speech by Joe Biden."

Close. Very close. And one must admire Mr. Healy for not only getting full writing credits into the first three paragraphs of his review — as opposed to most "film critics" who find it less of a strain on their

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limited intelligence to use the odious crushword "sci-fi" than to describe an individual film as what it *is*, without recourse to a demeaning neologism . . . and who ease that strain on their grey tapioca matter even more by pretending the director wrote the film, with never a scenarist credit to be found passim the review, much less a reference to the original source material — but Healy draws our applause for additionally noting the historical precedent for the plot. A film critic who not only *reads* (New Miracles! New Miracles!) but who has a sense of literary ebb and flow. And he's close, very close.

Yes, the famous 1924 Connell short story (oft-refilmed) is certainly the master template for *The Running Man*, but it isn't the *specific* work pilfered. We come to Steven de Souza's idioglottic screenplay by the way of the 1982 NAL paperback novel pseudonymously penned by Stephen King. And we come to Bachman's *The Running Man* by way of Robert Sheckley's famous short story "The Prize of Peril" (*The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, May 1958). It's about this guy who becomes an unwilling contestant on a nationally-obsessive tv program where you run and run and people try to kill you.

It was the story that sparked the campus fad some years back, for hunter/victim games in which students stalked each other and "killed" each other with paint-squibs from toy guns. Which fad, in turn, sparked a dreadful movie titled *Gotcha!*

When the Bachman book first appeared, it drew almost no attention, because no one knew it was Stephen behind the nom-de-plume. But when it came out, and prices for those four NAL throwaway adventure novels by "Bachman" went through the roof in antiquarian bookdealer catalogues that provide Colombian Gold-level fixes for King addicts, and NAL reissued the books in an omnibus volume, I received a call from Sheckley.

"Have you read *The Running Man*?" he asked me. "Listen: I may be crazy," Sheck said, with considerable nervousness and more than a scintilla of reluctance to rush to judgment, "but do you see a lot of my story 'The Prize of Peril' in that book?"

I said, "Yes, I see it as being damned nearly the same plot, done at length."

A silence passed between us. A long silence, in which each of us tried to find a way to speak the unspeakable, to approach that dreadful door behind which lay the necessity to think the unthinkable. Finally, Bob said:

"Well, what do you think?"

And I said, very carefully, "I know Steve, and I know damned well he

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wouldn't steal. It's that simple. But Stephen has often said that he's been inspired by films and stories he's read years before, that slipped down into the back of his head. This might be one of those cases."

Again a silence. And at last Sheckley asked, very hesitantly, "Do you think I should do something about this?"

"I think you ought to talk to Stephen."

What lay in the subtext of our conversation was the dire possibility that *something would have to be done.* As one who has been compelled to pursue legal means to redress the sins of plagiarism committed against me by film companies and tv networks, I was careful not to put Sheckley in a state of paranoia about *The Running Man.* But talking to Stephen King seemed the correct way to go about it. Sheckley asked me if I'd call Steve and give him Bob's number, and ask if he'd call.

I said I would; I called Steve and we talked; and he said he remembered reading "The Prize of Peril" years and years before; and he assured me he'd call Sheckley to work it out.

That call transpired, and Sheckley later told me he was satisfied with King's open remarks. The sense I got from what Sheck said, was that Steve may well have dredged out of the mire of memory the basic plotline of "Prize of Peril," never remembering it as an actual reading experience but transforming it, as all writers do, into the self-generated conceit that was published as *The Running Man.*

The aphorist Olin Miller has said, "Of all liars, the smoothest and most convincing is memory."

For those who have read Stephen King's *The Tommyknockers* and continue to endure the *frisson* of *déjà vu,* I suggest you rent the videocassette of *Five Million Years to Earth* (1968). And when you compare them, understand that I do not in even the tiniest way suggest that Stephen King cops the work of other writers. Let me say that again, even stronger, so no one of even the most diminished capacity can read into my words the ugly intimation: *Stephen King does not steal.* He's too good to *have* to steal. But in the realm of sf/fantasy there are ideas that we rework and re-rework, recast and refashion, expand and transmogrify, that become common coin. James Blish was not the first writer to use the "enclosed universe" concept, but who would deny his reinterpretation of Bob Heinlein's "Universe" as the extraordinary "Surface Tension"? And if Heinlein was sparked to write *The Puppet Masters* after being enthralled by Wells's *War of the Worlds,* is there anyone idiot enough to suggest it was plagiarism?

No, literary crossover happens. And we are all enriched by it.

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But "The Prize of Peril" is a richer way of telling the story at hand than *The Running Man*, especially as debased by Steven de Souza and Schwarzenegger. The lie we are fed, is the lie that *The Running Man* is a fresh, bold, new idea.

And if we look at *The Hidden*, from a screenplay by Robert Hunt, we can see the basic plot core of Hal Clement's famous novel of interplanetary cops-and-robbers, *Needle*. And we can see *The Hidden* ripped off for television as NBC's *Something is Out There*, the plot of which aired recently, with the promise that if there *is* a Fall Season, we'll be getting Hal Clement's *Needle* as a series written and produced by people who think *Something is Out There* is only first-generation theft, when it all proceeds from Clement . . . who won't see a cent of the millions these arrivistes will rake in.

The lie we are told is that these watered-down, scientifically illiterate, mook-level ripoffs are the Real Thing. And that is why, in installment 30½ of this column, I urged the Science Fiction Writers of America to reinstate the Dramatic Writing category in the Nebula awards. If sf writers don't move to quash the lie, then who will? And if the readers and writers in the genre don't come to their senses and stop accepting this institutionalized theft, on which the lie floats blissfully, then those of you who praise *dreck* like *The Running Man* deserve no better than you get. Behind that dreadful door through which you, as innocent moviegoers, pass to nullify your reason with special effects and the idolatry of Schwarzeneggers and Stallones and Michael J. Foxes, lies the awful truth that the treasure-house of ideas sf has filled since (at least) 1926, is being systematically looted by people who sneer at the concept of primacy of ownership of the creators.

More of that, by the way of codifying the Illiterate Audience, next time. But as coda to this essay, and to satisfy Brian Siano of Philadelphia, and the others who requested it, let me make my feelings known about Arnold Schwarzenegger, *et al.*

Somewhere in the commercially ongoing practice of (how shall I put this delicately) "Idolizing Meat" there is a nubbin of rationale that has always escaped me.

Idolizing Meat may have started in 1917 when the silent film actor Otto Elmo Linkenhelter was retitled Elmo Lincoln, and cast as the first incarnation of Burrough's lord of the jungle in *Tarzan of the Apes* . . . but there are very likely a dozen even earlier isometric idols that cine-historians can point out.

But thereafter, fer shoor, the film industry mentality has gifted us with one musclebound matinee idol after

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another, from Victor Mature and Steve Reeves to the current batch of melon-smugglers — a curl of Cro-Magnons, perhaps? — whose thespic abilities seem to me best subsumed in the quote from Dorothy Parker, or Alexander Wollcott, or somebody swell like that, who commented that a certain actress had flung her talent the full range from A to B.

I speak now of the cinematic lineal descendants of Johnny Weismuller, Buster Crabbe, and Gordon Scott: the vacuous Miles O'Keeffe, the anthracitelike Dolph Lundgren, the spectacularly untalented Sam J. Jones, to whom human speech does not appear to be a natural tongue, and those *rara avae*, Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger (were there ever two more perfect names for such as these?), who have transcended species, perhaps even phylum.

If one cannot fathom the mythic pull of the tongue-tied, lumbering beefcake as exemplified by Mature or Lundgren (and dontcha just know that in their heart of hearts they all want to assay the role of Hamlet), there is at least an inkling of what it is that draws us to the last of this parade of Idolized Meat.

Stallone first captured our respect and affection by turning his life into an American success story worthy of Horatio Alger, and then gave us a genuine sternum punch of an object-lesson in our own schizoid national character by JekyllHydeing into a Rocky/Rambo gaucherie of arrogance, insolence, brutality, and crippled expectations.

Schwarzenegger departs from the enigma of beefcake through the exeunt left of having demonstrated a cynical sense of humor about himself, about "the business," and about the archetypes he is supposed to represent. The superman, the unstoppable engine, the noble savage. Any man who can make a joke on himself about how much more gracefully the stop-motion robot in *Terminator* moves than *he* does, is a man whose career as an actor might well outdistance mere testosterone.

But as Michael Healy points out in the review I quoted earlier, the sneaky pleasure we derived from watching Schwarzenegger in *Pumping Iron* and *Terminator* is absent from humorless, jaundiced slaughterfests like *Commando*, *Raw Deal*, *Predator* and, most particularly, *The Running Man*.

This film is the latest in a demonstration of how paucive intelligences will loot the treasurehouse. It knows nothing of the logic of science fiction. Nothing of the internal tensions that make sf work on the screen, a la *Blade Runner*. Nothing of extrapolation along sensible lines. This is one of those utterly unworkable "future societies" that

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make no sense save in the rathole rationalizations of know-nothings and studio heads. There is no characterization — which in a film that stars Schwarzenegger is a knife through the gut — not even for an actor as compelling as Yaphet Koto. They are set-ups, to be gunned down for thug audiences for whom the judgement scale of quality is measured in liters of blood.

And so Schwarzenegger's Ben Richards becomes, in the clubby hands of Steven de Souza and director Paul Michael Glaser (who I can never remember which he was, Starsky or Hutch), nothing but a chunk of Idolized Meat with bad puns grafted on.

If this film has *any* claim to posterity, it will be due to the spectacular performance of Richard Dawson as Damon Killian, the tv game show host. It is a performance so dazzling that one can assume Dickie Dawson wasn't this year's Oscar winner for Best Male Supporting because of the redolent nature of the film itself.

And the crusher that denied Dawson his moment of international acclaim is the same crusher that flattens us, as aficionados of the literature of imagination. The crusher is the Little White Lie that steals from the treasurehouse and dulls the patina of the artifact, and substitutes Idolized Meat for the rapture of the sense of wonder. And gets you to pay for, and then praise indiscriminately, the devalued product.

Can it be that you have been reduced to the lowest idiot expectancy because of the untutored nature of the Illiterate Audience?

Well, let me leave you with the words of Stephen King, who has often said the best a writer can hope for from Hollywood is when "they buy the rights, pay you half a million dollars, for some reason never make the movie — but you get to keep the half million without the embarrassment of some awful film coming out."

Which is a whole helluva lot sweeter than no one knowing Sheckley or Clement were there first, and ain't gonna see a kopek for the error of cleverness and early arrival.

TO OUR READERS

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The superior story you are about to read is Jessie Thompson's first sale. The author writes: "I now live in northern California near the ocean, and though I love the warm fog and soft nights, I think about what it would be like to live closer to the real true edge again. To stick my tongue to frozen metal on a dare. To walk on booming ice. . ."

Snowfall

By Jessie Thompson

THE SNOW JUST falls and falls, white and silent and cold as frozen fox bones. The girl watches from her bedroom window, thinking of baby foxes, hot-blooded and soft-furred, running and burrowing under the dark pine trees behind the farmhouse.

"Cindy! Supper." Cindy doesn't answer. Her mother shouts up the stairs again. The radiator hisses as darkness captures another corner of the twilight room. Cindy hides the tiny fox skull, then rises from her bed and goes downstairs, her foot pausing in the air above each step.

One part of her mind is listening for the danger sounds that mean he's home. But mostly she's thinking about bright-eyed baby foxes.

The kitchen is hot and steamy. The windows are fogged over. Jack and Danny tumble like puppies in the corner, their squeals shredding the silence. Smaller, quieter noises come from her mother, crying at the stove. Cindy's heart contracts. Her mother is banging pots and spoons to hide the choked-off little gasps of pain, but Cindy's hearing is acute. I'm like a

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fox, she thinks. I have fox ears. I watch like a fox, and I can smell trouble coming.

He comes in. He stinks like cow shit. The boys stop tussling, but not fast enough. A slap on the side of the head catches Danny by surprise, and he cries out. Jack grabs his cowboy gun, the knuckles on his pudgy baby hand turning white. "Bang!" he shouts, pointing the gun at his father. "Bang! Bang!" The gun flies across the room as a rough hand yanks him into the air. He hits the wall and slides down into a wailing heap. Danny, face flushed, rolls to cover him, holds him tight.

The big man's face is red, too; he's leaning forward, stepping closer. "Don't you ever point that gun at me again, mister. You hear?"

Cindy glances at her mother. Her face is pale, and her jaw muscles are squeezed tight. She doesn't look up from the stove.

Under Danny, Jack is whimpering. "Put him in his chair. Sit. You too, girl." He glares at Cindy. She sees a strange flicker pass through his eyes. She's seen it a lot lately. She doesn't know what it means. His eyes drop away.

"Let's eat, for christsakes. Jesus. I work myself ragged all day to come home to this bullshit?"

He takes a beer out of the refrigerator and thwunks the door shut. It springs back at him, and he kicks it closed. "You damn well better do something about these kids, Claire. If they get any wilder, I'm sure as hell not going to work my butt off to feed the little bastards."

Cindy slides into her chair and spreads her napkin on her lap. She studies the brown crack in her plate. Her mother turns from the stove. Outside, the snow is falling. They eat. He complains.

In the night, she dreams. She dreams she's in the woods, playing chase with baby foxes. She's hiding in a gopher hole on the edge of the field, peering out, snout snuffling cold air, eyes darting around mischievously, laughter rising in her throat.

She wakes to darkness, can smell snow still falling outside. Her mother's high-pitched voice wails up and down like a mournful siren, furious words lost in sobbing. A loud slap, and the sobbing stops. The radiator starts to bang, over and over, bangs and bangs and thrums through the house. Cindy's heart is pounding in her ears. She thinks of baby foxes. Her breathing slows, and she falls asleep.

She sleeps and dreams of foxes in the pines, and then the monster

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comes. The huge white beast finds her hiding in the woods, sleeping with the foxes on a bed of warm snow. It looms over her, whispering that it won't hurt her. It says it loves her. She knows it lies.

She tries to scream, but whiteness covers her face, presses against her mouth. A sharp pain stabs her belly. The beast is breathing hard, hissing foul breath. Pain shoots up her belly in cramping spasms. Hot monster slime trickles down her clenched throat.

She thinks of her friends the foxes, and they poke their noses out from behind the logs and bushes, watching with bright eyes as she struggles not to choke and slip into darkness. The monster is heavy on her, squeezing out the last of her air. It's just snow, she thinks. I've fallen asleep outside, and the snow is burying me. Under the snow, it's warm and soft and silent. Her muscles relax, and she surrenders to the whiteness. When it melts away into the night, she wakes up wet and sweating. There's a funny smell in the air.

She sits at the table with a woman in an apron and a man in dirty, faded blue overalls. Two little boys climb into chairs across the table from her. She sees them glance at the man sideways, fear in their bright eyes. Little foxes. Ready to dart away. Cindy can't remember what she's doing at this table, with these people.

A shadow, huge and white, crosses her mind, but she doesn't grab it in time. Snow falls on it and covers its tracks. "Cindy," the woman says. "Eat your food, hon." Cindy thinks of foxes, how they tickle her ears with their snouts, and she forgets to puzzle out the woman's words.

A sweet-smelling, warm, safe burrow. Hours pass, unnoticed. Night drifts down, quiet as the snow. The huge white beast-thing comes again.

Morning. She sits at a table with the smell of eggs and frying bacon in her nose. Outside, it's blue. Bright, blinding blue pouring in the windows and the open door. Diamonds glitter in mounds on the windowsills. Bacon, eggs, table. Puzzled, she considers each item separately and then all together. The room is familiar. But the creatures make no sense. Since when do snow monsters eat bacon and eggs?

The one at the end of the table is huge. It's the color of old, dirty snow. A clump of pine needles tops its head like hair. The monster glares at a

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smaller, very white monster standing at the stove. Both have black cinders where eyes should be. The monsters are wearing her parents' clothes.

Suddenly the big monster stands up, rocking the table. Loud, angry noises pour out of it, out of a gaping hole that rips the bottom of its face apart. It throws a bowl down, hard. The smaller monster starts to wail, face hole splitting wider and wider until its black eyes disappear. Holding a frying pan high, it comes rushing toward the table.

Cindy notices for the first time the two little foxes sitting across the table from her. They grab each other and twitter and yap in fox voices, then slide from the table and run out the open door.

Cindy gets up to leave, too, but a hot, snowy monster grabs her shoulder. She winces with pain. The big monster picks her up and thrusts her in front of the frying pan, which slams into her back with a crack. She's dizzy. The room is getting dark. The monster holds her up in the air now with one paw, holds her by the throat, roars something that sounds like, "Your fault — your fault. . . ."

And then, suddenly, the monster's belly turns the color of dirty snow when you pee on it, and Cindy's underpants feel warm and wet. The monster hurls her to the floor; she's down on her knees, crawling through the door, heading for the bright blue air. Crawling across the cold snow into the pine trees, where she's sure the little foxes must have gone.

A booming noise is coming closer.

She hears the baby foxes yipping in the woods, and crawls toward them. The air shakes and roars. Her throat tastes like firecrackers. Two booms, and the frantic yipping stops. Another boom, and the smaller monster is right above her, spraying red all over the snow, crumpling to the ground. The big monster rushes toward Cindy, boom stick waving. It stops, frozen now, staring down at her with cinder eyes.

A truck is screaming down the long gravel road, horn blaring. The monster stops, turns around. Slowly, slowly, the short double stick goes into its own mouth hole. One more boom. There's a roaring in Cindy's ears. The blue sky darkens. Stars explode. And snow begins to fall.

Low sun. Hot white walls. Cindy squats on her haunches, staring out the window. The pine trees are gone. Something clicks on, hums and buzzes. Cool air lifts the short hairs on her neck. Cindy strokes the little fox

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skull hidden in her gown; rhythmically polishes it. Her paw slips in and out of the eyeholes.

A door opens behind her. "Cindy, it's time to eat. Come with me, honey." The young woman approaches. Reaches out a gentle hand. Cindy crouches lower, ready to spring. A growl rises from deep in her throat. The woman yanks her hand back, turns abruptly, and leaves the room.

Cindy's snout itches. She smiles and scratches it and stares with bright, feral eyes at the man in overalls watering the lawn outside. He sees her watching him, and smiles back. There's the smell of cut grass in his smile, and maybe a whiff of cow shit. She bares her teeth and glares at him until he turns away.

Slowly, slowly, she moves toward the window. Her paw fumbles with the rusted lock. Frustrated, she tries her teeth. The window snaps open with a crack like the crack of a gun. Startled, she jumps. Pain shoots through her tail as it catches on the jagged sill, but she yanks the tail free and scampers across the wet grass. The man in overalls shouts.

Cindy crouches under the bushes, peering out, eyes laughing. A young woman runs across the lawn toward the smelly man in overalls. His arm waves wildly in Cindy's direction. Behind them, a man in white bends over the windowsill. He holds up something red. Cindy grins. The pain in her tail is already gone.

Hunkered down, she backs out of the bush and into the warm, dark woods, yipping a greeting to the chuckling foxes. Above the shocked and frozen humans, the spray from the sprinkler rises higher and higher and turns to snow.

Coming Soon

Next month: October is our 39th anniversary issue, featuring two remarkable novelets by *Lucius Shepard* and *Clive Barker*, along with new stories by *Ray Bradbury, Avram Davidson, Frederik Pohl, Wayne Wightman, Ben Bova* and others. Don't miss this special issue. Send us the card insert or the coupon on page 160.

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Ron Goulart ("Business As Usual," July 1987) continually delights us with his satiric black humor. In "House of Secrets" he returns to one of his favorite "stomping" grounds, Hollywood. There, located among the starlets and glitter, is a certain haunted house in which a down-and-out writer is hired to spend a few nights. . . .

House of Secrets

By Ron Goulart

THE CHARGES BROUGHT against him were somewhat unusual. They included assaulting a mystic and attempting to dig up a rock star's basement. Things could've been worse, though, since Lud Jardinian had also been planning to blackmail a former president of the United States. But that didn't work out.

Lud was a lean, dark man, thirty-seven years old and two and a half inches shorter than he wanted to be. He was supposedly a television and motion-picture scriptwriter, although he hadn't had any assignments for seventeen months. Since neither his wife nor his main lady friend wanted anything to do with him at the moment, he was living in a rented cottage in a weedy part of Westwood. The day he realized he was two months behind on his rent and most of his bills, Lud decided to visit his oldest friend in Hollywood.

That was why he had been sitting in the executive waiting room at the Monogram-International Pictures studios out in Burbank two weeks ago.

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It was a fuzzy Tuesday afternoon, and Lud had watched it wane and gradually approach twilight from a stiff metal and leather chair.

He shifted his weight again, causing many of his more important bones to make weary creaking sounds.

The incredibly lovely blonde receptionist smiled sympathetically. "Mr. Erdlatz ought to be able to see you any minute now."

"It'll be an honor."

"He's quite busy."

"I've been able to deduce that during my stay here."

After rearranging a small stack of memos, the receptionist said, "I understand you and Mr. Erdlatz have been friends since college days."

"Chums," agreed Lud.

"You were in the same fraternity at USC?"

Nodding, he said, "We were frat brothers, yes. We shared many a good time. And Kane also shared my car, several of my women, most of my part-time income, and a goodly portion of my allowance from home."

She smiled. "I went to business college."

"That's not as much fun," Lud told her. "For real fun, you need a buddy like Kane Erdlatz and a college such—"

"Of course, of course. Sitting here bitching and moaning." The large sun-brown blond man who'd opened the door to the right of the receptionist's desk was gazing out. "What else would you—"

"Helps while away the hours." Lud stood, not holding out his hand.

Kane Erdlatz jerked a thumb at his immense office. "C'mon in," he invited. "Hold my calls, Elana."

"You can't categorize it as a fall from grace." Erdlatz was behind his large silvery desk, tapping his fingers on a scattering of magazines. "Since you were never that high on the ladder to begin with, Lud. But to end up writing articles for mags like *Naked People, Disgusting,* and *Hots* is to have betrayed what little early promise you did have. Cheap girlie mags published in places like Glendale and—"

"*Disgusting* is a humor magazine."

"And to sign your own name to this stuff is—"

"Kane, I need some kind of job. Since you're now head of Monogram, I was hoping you—"

"It isn't hope that wins ball games. You—"

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"They're going to toss me in the street if I don't come up with the rent by—"

"Where've you been living since your wife booted you out?"

"Westwood. I have a small yet palatial—"

"Well, nobody pays much attention to what happens in Westwood. So when you do get thrown into the street, nobody will even notice or—"

"You just signed Coke Dakers to a multipicture contract," cut in Lud, rising some out of his deep, wide chair. "One of the hottest rock stars in America, and he's going to do his first feature film for you. When I was over at Alch Films, I scripted *Study Hall, Final Exam, Study Hall II,* and—"

"Turkeys all," remarked Erdlatz. "I heard the Civil Defense people were considering using *Study Hall II* as a surefire way to evacuate towns in case of—"

"I can write down a damn good script with adolescent angst and—"

"Because you never grew up. Mentally, you're still in the acne stage." He patted the top of his desk, located a pale blue memo, and held it up. "Here's something that pays a thousand . . . make that twelve hundred, for old times' sake . . . per week."

"For how many weeks?"

"Two."

"That's not enough time to write a—"

"There's nothing for you here in the writing end."

"But what about the Coke Dakers movie?"

"Deal's all set. We got, and were darn lucky to snag him, Elroy Flurch to write it."

"Never heard of him. What are his credits?"

"So far none, but he understands youth. Which he ought to, since he's just fourteen."

After making a small strangled sound, Lud inquired, "About this twelve-hundred-a-week job?"

Rubbing the memo slip across his chin, Erdlatz said, "Many talented people are superstitious."

"I know that, yes."

"One such is Coke Dakers," he went on. "He feels especially uneasy about ghosts."

Lud straightened up. "Wait now, I heard he was going to buy Maggie Marable's old mansion, that enormous Moorish place in Beverly Hills

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where she carried on with statesmen, literary lights, and show business luminaries before—"

"It's also where she killed herself some thirteen years ago."

"That's a long time, especially in Hollywood. Coke Dakers doesn't believe that her ghost is still haunting—"

"He's heard rumors," said Erdlatz. "Rumors helped along by the fact that the last tenant — some weenie who made two hot karate movies in 1980 — ran screaming from the place one evening and never returned."

"When was that?"

"Three years ago, and no one has lived there since. Coke is getting the place for a hell of a price — just $900,000."

"But he's afraid to move in?"

"He'd prefer to have someone test the waters first."

"They do something similar to this in India, to catch wild tigers."

Erdlatz said, "Look, you live in the mansion for two weeks. Check everything out; see if it's haunted or not. You make yourself $2,400, a lot more than *Naked People* pays you for compromising what few—"

"You've never been at all charitable. So this isn't some idea you came up with to slip me money."

"It's exactly what I'm telling you it is," said the tanned movie executive. "Coke is very anxious to move in. He's going to be living with Mintzy Whyte-Melville soon as she gets back from Montreal."

"What's she doing there?"

"Shooting *Chicago*."

Shaking his head slowly, Lud said, "I don't know. This sounds like some dumb comic-book story I read as a kid. Something from an issue of *House of Secrets* or *House of Mystery*. Spend-a-night-in-the-old-dark-house stuff."

"Except, the pay is better."

"In the stories, the nitwit who does it ends up either stone-cold dead the next morning, or they find him wandering the moors, baying like a loon, with his hair turned to silver."

"You're practically a loon now, and there isn't all that much hair to worry about." Erdlatz fluttered the memo. "So?"

"Half the money in front?"

"A third."

"Done," said Lud.

* * *

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A chill rain and a harsh wind attacked Lud as he ran from his five-year-old Toyota along the gravel drive toward the wide oaken front door of the gray Moorish-style mansion. The wind wrenched one of the red tiles off the slanting roof, sent it hurtling down to smack into his only usable suitcase.

Huddled on the red tile porch, Lud fished out the door key. Erdlatz had attached a little tag to it that read *Haunted House.*

"Whimsy." After about a minute of struggle, he got the door unlocked.

Creaking impressively, the thick old door swung inward at his push.

He stumbled across the threshold out of the rain-swept night.

Dropping his suitcase next to a heavy redwood table, he reached out and turned on all the light switches — six of them — available.

Orange bulbs in gnarled wrought-iron holders blossomed on the pale peach stucco walls of the long hallway. More dusty light came on in the wrought-iron chandelier dangling midway along the corridor.

The house smelled of dust, old smoke, and mildew.

Taking a careful deep breath, Lud picked up his rain-spattered suitcase and carried it along the hall into the main living room.

Four more black light switches here. There were still Navajo rugs on the hardwood floor, as well as a low black leather sofa and two matching armchairs. The stone fireplace was deep and shadowy; rain was coming down it to splatter a mound of very old ashes.

Putting his suitcase down on the dusty hearth, Lud began a slow circuit of the large, chill room.

"Yike!"

The phone on the tile and wrought-iron coffee table had commenced ringing.

After another deep breath, he answered it. "Hello?"

"What sort of dippy phone number is this?"

"Beverly Hills. I'm sort of house-sitting as a favor to—"

"I know it's Beverly Hills. Isn't it my business to know things like that? Don't millions of people across the country read my syndicated 'Hollywood Dirt' column in 463 newspapers because I know all—"

"Pearl, the reason I tried to call you earlier is—"

"That's another thing. I was just starting to live down the fact I'm married to you. We've been separated a year and a half; people are starting to forget. But then you tell my service to have me call my husband at this

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mysterious dippy number in Beverly Hills, and it looks—"

"Pearl, I need a little help from you about—"

"No, nope, absolutely not. I won't loan you another dollar," said his estranged wife in that voice he had, somehow, once found charming. "Well, wait a minute. If you happen to be dying of an incurable disease and could swear to me . . . actually, a notarized statement would be better . . . could assure me you have only weeks to live . . . days would be better . . . then I might loan you up to two hundred dollars. And I'll see you to a headstone. A small one."

"I'm not dying, Pearl."

"And what other bad news do you have for me? I have a dinner date, two screenings, and an assignation on for tonight, so—"

"Maggie Marable," he managed to put in.

"Hum?"

"It's her house I'm sitting."

His wife's voice gentled. "Oh, so? I sense a story here."

"Not yet."

"What do you mean 'not yet'? You have to give me what you have ahead of any other—"

"Eventually, sure. Now, though, Pearl, just attend to me for a moment. The reason—"

"There you go again, Lud. Pulling your my-wife-never-listens-to-me act. Honestly, that's the dippiest—"

"Coke Dakers has bought the Maggie Marable place here, and I—"

"I know that. It was in my column last Tuesday, and if you read it regularly, you wouldn't be so—"

"Dakers has the notion the mansion is haunted."

"Everybody's heard that dippy rumor. It's nothing but publicity crap, started by her washed-up agent to—"

"I'm supposed to live here for a couple weeks, see if a ghost or a demon or anything else is in residence."

"That might make an interesting item. Fifty, sixty words about—"

"What I wanted from you was a little background on Maggie Marable. Her career, her romances," said Lud. "And the reason for her suicide."

"It may not've been suicide."

"Meaning?"

"I'll have Jody send you some material on MM," promised his wife.

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"Meanwhile, call me if you get anything else on what Coke is—"

"I don't even know him. This job—"

"And if you do see a ghost, tell me before you tell anybody. Get pictures, but use something better than that clunky camera you—"

"I don't intend to see ghosts," he told her. "The reason I want to know something more about Maggie Marable is so I can carry on intelligent conversations with Kane Erdlatz and whoever else asks me about—"

"Right now I have to go. Jody'll send you the stuff. Bye."

He hung up.

The rain was coming down harder, and there was a new smell in the room.

"Perfume," said Lud, sniffing.

He decided he wasn't going to let that unsettle him.

Lud didn't have a real encounter until his third midnight. He'd been sitting up in the big four-poster bed, reading through the fat folder of material on Maggie Marable that his wife had sent over by messenger that afternoon.

"Andrew Willis, too?" he was murmuring. "Did I know that about her? He was Senator Willis then, didn't become president until after she was dead. Interesting."

Rain returned a few minutes shy of twelve, a light rain hitting gently on the tile roof.

Yawning, Lud slumped, his head sinking into the pillow. The folder shut, dropped to his lap with his forefinger making a marker.

He always slept in pajama tops only. Now, as he drifted closer into sleep, Lud became aware of a warmth growing along his bare left leg.

Blinking, he glanced over to his left and then sat up again. "Pearl, would that be you?"

There was a woman under the covers next to him. Body and head hidden by the pale blue comforter. But that backside wasn't familiar, wasn't his wife's. Pearl's was much sparser.

"Pardon me, miss." He reached toward the covered figure stretched out beside him. "I don't know how you sneaked in here, but. . . ."

When he tried to tap her on the shoulder, the blanket all at once collapsed. He was patting nothing but firm mattress.

"Yow!" he remarked. He leaped free of the wide bed, sending the gossip

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file on Maggie Marable spinning into the air and scattering its pages.

He didn't get quite clear of the satin sheets, and he fell on one knee to the floor. After sliding on a throw rug, he came to a stop against the louvered door of the wide wardrobe closet.

"Her." He eyed the now seemingly empty bed. "That was her. Maggie Marable. Sure, I should've recognized her body right off."

He walked, slowly and backward, out of here. The sofa in the living room wasn't comfortable at all. He stayed stretched out on it for all the drizzling, restless night.

The next night she talked to him.

That happened in the large white beam-ceilinged kitchen. He was dawdling in there, brewing some hot cocoa in hopes it'd ease his second night on the grim sofa. In addition to cocoa, he spooned in some Ovaltine he'd located at the back of a pantry shelf. Long ago, in his youth, his mother had come close to convincing him Ovaltine helped you sleep. For good measure, he was going to add rum from the pint he'd bought in a liquor store down on the Strip that afternoon.

Lud was watching the milk in the saucepan, wearing a candy-striped apron he'd uncovered in the broom closet.

"Hey, you can help me."

He turned away from the milk to stare at the dark doorway into the hall. There was no sign of anyone.

"Otherwise I'm doomed to roam this dump forever. And that's really very boring," said the voice that was coming from out in the hall. "It's a drag. Or do people still say things are a drag? I'm sort of out of touch."

"Most people don't, I guess," he replied in a thin voice that sounded much more youthful than usual.

Most of the schmucks who've lived here run off before I ever got to explain what I want."

Lud asked, "Are you going to come in here?"

"Not tonight. It's a real strain to materialize, and I'm going to save that until tomorrow, probably."

"Good, fine."

"The other problem is that, you know, I can communicate for only a few minutes each night. So, please, don't be a putz and go screaming into the night. O.K.?"

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This was the ghost of Maggie Marable he was chatting with.

"How exactly can I help you, Miss Marable?" He had no doubt that this was the ghost of Maggie Marable he was chatting with.

"Call me Maggie. And you're . . . ?"

"Lud Jardinian."

"That's an Armenian name."

"My father's Armenian, yes."

"O.K., enough small talk. Here's the situation; pay attention. Since I was murdered, I have to haunt this dump until—"

"Murdered?"

Only silence from the long, dark hallway.

"Did you say you'd been murdered, Miss Marable? Maggie?"

There was no response.

It took him approximately three minutes to walk from the stove to the open doorway.

He did some complicated breathing before thrusting his head out into the hall.

It was empty, although a strong, musky perfume lingered.

He was sitting in the living room late the next afternoon, once again going over the notes Pearl had provided.

"Andrew Willis seems the most likely suspect," he said to himself. "Married, considering a presidential run. Is that the way things work in real life, though? Sure, in a script the most likely suspect always turns out to be completely innocent, unless you're going to pull a switch and—"

The phone rang, and he answered it.

"That skinny bitch," said the voice of Kane Erdlatz.

"Which skinny bitch?"

"Your wife, Pearl Seabride. Don't you see 'Hollywood Dirt' every day?"

"I skip now and then. What exactly—"

"She's got an item about Coke. Says he's afraid of ghosts, fearful of moving into his new house."

"Oh, so?"

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"Did you happen to mention this new assignment of yours to that underfed bimbo or—"

"She's still my wife. Naturally, I'm going to share my triumphs and my—"

"Coke is ticked off; this hurts his image."

"Lots of people have faith in the spirit world. Admitting a belief in spooks may well improve his—"

"The guy I'm going to star in *Slaughter's Revenge* can't admit to being afraid of anything," Erdlatz pointed out. "He's extremely unhappy."

"Suffering is good for artists, helps them to—"

"Coke's going to do something drastic if I don't get the guy calmed down. If, for instance, I could assure him that you haven't encountered so much as a hint of a ghost during your lengthy and expensive stay there, that'd help."

Lud didn't immediately reply.

"Old buddy?"

"I haven't exactly encountered anything," Lud lied. "But I do sense something. Tell you what: when my two weeks are up, I'm sure I'll be able to give the mansion a clean bill of health. Just don't want to commit myself right at the—"

"You may not have two weeks. Coke's damn uneasy about that item in your skinny wife's column, and he may try to—"

"Pearl is slender. When you earn as much as she does, you can't be classed as skinny. Only poor people are—"

"Get some results," advised Erdlatz, and hung up.

Lud put down the phone, then went trotting upstairs to the master bedroom.

Halting next to the big bed, he glanced around. "Maggie," he said aloud. "I may get tossed out of here anytime now. So if there's, you know, anything you'd like to tell me from the great beyond . . . well, the sooner the better."

He paused, shoulders hunched.

Nothing occurred.

A minute shy of midnight, he saw her at last.

He was in the kitchen, making cocoa.

"Are you dumb or what? A writer, you sure ought to know ghosts can

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communicate only at the witching hour." The pretty blonde young woman was framed in the doorway, wearing what appeared to be a simple black cocktail dress.

"That's a nice dress."

"It's the dumb thing my agent had me buried in," Maggie Marable said. "For some reason, don't ask me why, I always have it on when I materialize. Personally, I'd like to a little more variety in my wardr—"

"It's nice meeting you, finally. I was a great fan of your movies, especially *The Naked Gun* and *Which Blonde Has the*—"

"Listen, I don't have all that much time. Go easy on the gush."

He nodded. "Right, you better tell me about your murder."

"You're really married to that skinny gossip columnist, huh?"

"Slender, and we're separated. Who exactly did you in?"

"It was Andy."

"Andrew Willis?"

"Him, yes." The dead actress took a step into the kitchen. "Who would've thought? I know I nagged him a lot, urged him to leave that dim-witted wife of his — funny how many otherwise rational men marry dimwits. I made what was, in retrospect, a dumb move. Threatened to make our affair public if he didn't dump her. A politician like Andy—"

"That wasn't wise, since he was getting ready about then to run for—"

"Don't I know it wasn't wise, Lud?" She pointed a thumb at her chest. "He slipped a couple dozen sleeping pills in my scotch, and — bam! — I go to sleep and wake up in glory. And I'm not even a full-fledged citizen of the hereafter, because they have this dim-witted rule that every spirit has to avenge his or her murder before being—"

"To do a really efficient job of avenging you, Maggie, we'll have to have proof of what Willis did."

"I don't actually have any proof that he doped my drink. Once I got on the other side, of course, I heard him talking about it to one of his associates. That, though, is only hearsay evidence."

"You've kept up with politics, haven't you? Andrew Willis was president. Two terms. Before we can accuse a former president of the United—"

"I know damn well that bastard was president of the country. When you're doomed to roam this level of existence, you watch a lot of television. Not that I much like the dimwit who's in office now, but nobody made duller speeches than Andy. He could. . . . Hey! My diaries."

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"Hum?" He eased closer to her.

"I kept a journal, ever since I was a gawky kid back in Iola, Wisconsin," explained the spectral actress. "Some of the later entries are pretty steamy. I mentioned Andy a lot."

"That wouldn't prove Willis did you in, but it would sure link him to you. From there we—"

"I recall writing down a few of the arguments we had, some of the threats he made."

"Where are these diaries?"

"I hid them here in this damn house, hid them well enough so that nobody would be able to find them."

"Fine, then just tell me where you. . . . Maggie?"

She was grimacing, bending slightly and clutching at her midsection. "We have to wait until my next—"

"Where are they?"

She pointed at the floor. "You have to go down into. . . ."

Then she wasn't with him.

Her image snapped away, and he was alone.

"Maggie?"

Completely alone.

The sunlight glared off the ocean. Pearl, standing near the wide window of the studio in her beachfront house, was outlined in a harsh yellow-gold light. "Don't be a goon. Where are the damn books?"

"I'll find out tonight," Lud assured her. "What I want to know from you is, what would those diaries of hers be worth?"

"Maggie Marable's love diaries? One hell of a lot. Millions." His wife turned her back on the bright afternoon Pacific. "First off, we auction the book rights and get all those dorks in Manhattan fighting over them. I can sell the newspaper rights to my syndicate for a whole enormous stewpot of dough. There's also a movie in them, a TV special, a Broadway play. Hell, and that's only the start."

"We," he corrected. "*We* can sell them."

"That's what I meant, Lud."

"What about President Willis?"

"He's not president any longer, so he can't—"

"He's back with his old law firm up in San Francisco. What I mean

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is — how close can we come to suggesting he murdered Maggie Marable?"

"Pretty close," his wife answered. "Once we have the diaries and can show she was fooling around with him — You're absolutely certain she didn't tell you where they were?"

He shook his head. "Nope, she was just coming to that part."

"O.K., tonight," decided Pearl. "I better come over to the mansion, too."

"No, you stick here. I've established a relationship with Maggie. Having a gossip columnist there would only futz it up."

"Me? Don't I interview the most aloof, the crankiest celebrities in the world and get them to open up, to blurt out their innermost secrets?"

"Ghosts are different."

His wife eyed him. "You wouldn't be contemplating swiping those diaries all for yourself?"

"I wanted your advice. Naturally, I'll share the profits with you."

"You may not be as big a dodo as I thought." Pearl smiled at him. "Why not stay for dinner?"

He lectured himself during most of the long drive from the beach back to Beverly Hills.

"Dumb, exceedingly dumb," Lud said, checking his watch yet again and discovering that midnight was almost upon him. "Not to mention gauche. Sleeping with your own wife. Worse, dawdling around her place so long you'll probably miss your meeting with Maggie tonight."

A light rain commenced as he began the climb up the final twisting, hilly road.

"And Pearl doesn't even trust you," he added. "Thinks you're going to keep the journals all to yourself."

He turned the windshield wipers on.

"During dinner she suggested that I was so low that I might even take the damn diaries and try to blackmail President Willis with them." He laughed disdainfully. "Her opinion of me is even lower than.... Matter of fact, he isn't president anymore. So if you did approach him, the Secret Service couldn't take a shot at you or anything. And the guy's a multimillionaire, isn't he? All the money he made from writing his memoirs — and he already had family money."

Driving through the wrought-iron gates of the Maggie Marable estate, he headed for the garages.

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"You could sell to Willis just the volumes that mentioned him — No, not even the volumes. Just his pages. Sure, and keep the rest of them for book publication and all the other perks you and Pearl were talking about tonight. Willis would pay — maybe a million to cover his reputation. That, plus all the book money, would. . . . Hey!"

A battered pink van was parked right smack in front of the garages.

Hitting the brakes, he parked his car in the drive, turned off the ignition, and dived out into the rainy night.

It was now eleven minutes beyond midnight.

He tripped on the slippery tile steps, fell to his knees. Before he got up, the front door of the house opened.

A thickset man in a rumpled tan suit emerged. He was pink-faced, had crinkly gray sideburns, and his plastic-framed spectacles were patched with two Band-Aids. Clutched in his plump right hand was a very battered black attaché case.

"Shall I present you with the bill, good sir? Or simply mail it to Mr. Coke Dakers?"

"Bill for what?"

Reaching down with his free hand, the plump pinkish man assisted Lud to rise. "My services."

"What kind of services could you have been performing at this ungodly hour?"

"Ah, good sir, this is exactly the right time for this sort of thing." Grunting, he reached inside his wrinkled coat and produced a folded sheet of yellow paper. "There's a charge for paraphernalia, of course. Incantations I throw in free, but my time I bill you at $150 an hour or any portion thereof."

An odd pungent odor was wafting out of the house. "What is it you do, exactly?"

"Forgive me, I haven't, good sir, introduced myself. Encountering you arse over teakettle on the stoop here quite robbed me of my manners, I fear," he said. "I am Abdul the Mystic. My business name, you understand."

"What did you do in there, Abdul?"

"Why, exorcised the uneasy spirit of Maggie Marable," he replied. "Only took me seven minutes, but I have to charge you for the full hour, because that's the way I—"

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"Exorcised her? She's gone?"

"For all eternity. There's a warranty stamped at the bottom of the bill explaining that, for legal purposes, eternity is defined as—"

"Why in the hell did you do a half-witted thing like—"

"Mr. Dakers insisted. Since he'd been made a fool in the press, he vowed he must move in at once," explained Abdul the Mystic. "Since he didn't want to face a ghost, he did what he should have done at the offset, and hired a crackerjack exorcist."

"But she was going to tell me where . . . tell me something important."

"Ha, that must be what she was shrieking about just prior to my dispatching her off to her well-deserved eternal rest."

Lud took hold of the mystic by the shoulders. "What? What did she say?"

"Something about the basement, as I recall, but I didn't pay that much attention. On a job like this, I work solo, and keeping the sulfur burning and reciting all the spells calls for a heck of a lot of concentra—"

"Think, Abdul."

"I fear that's all I remember, good sir." He waggled the sheet of yellow paper. "Perhaps I'd best leave this with you, since you're no doubt the custodian I was told would—"

"You half-wit. You've cost me millions, and now you want me to pay you $150 for—"

"Not $150. That's just my hourly wage. I also billed you for the sulfur, the. . . . Oof!"

Lud whacked him over the skull several times with his own briefcase. As soon as Abdul the Mystic had dropped to the hall floor, Lud leaped over him and went stomping down into the basement.

"Maggie? Are you here at all?"

She didn't answer him.

He located a shovel and a pick in the chill, musty shadows. "That's what she must've meant. She buried the diaries down here someplace."

He was still in the basement, almost through the thick concrete, when Erdlatz and the police arrived two hours later.

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If you missed the earlier episodes, the author's synopsis will quickly prepare you for the stunning conclusion to the adventures of Alaric the minstrel. An expanded version of this story will be published by New American Library in the summer of 1989.

BEYOND THE RED LORD'S REACH

By Phyllis Eisenstein

SYNOPSIS OF INSTALLMENTS #1 & #2

Alaric the minstrel, whose witch's power enables him to travel beyond the horizon in an instant, has run from a nightmare. Behind him lies the valley of the grim Red Lord, a man who finds his pleasure in torturing innocent people to death. Alaric could have killed him, and freed the valley folk from that tyranny, but he was afraid of being killed himself in the act. Now the man and his own fear, flees northward across a vast rolling plain of grass.

He joins a band of deer-hunting nomads, and at the great gathering of their people, at the calving grounds, he does not lack for food and bright fires and laughter. The nomads' high chief Simir is so taken with Alaric's songs that he invites the minstrel to join his own band, to share their substance and their journey. Liking Simir immediately, and having no better place to go, Alaric accepts.

Always before, Alaric has been a wanderer, passing through his listeners' lives as through a landscape. Now he finds himself deeply entangled in the lives of the nomads, for good and for ill. Zavia, a beautiful and willful young woman, becomes his lover, and the youths who formerly shared her among them — Simir's three sons — become his enemies. When Alaric reveals, in song, that he visited the Red Lord's valley and knows of its horrors, the eldest son even accuses him of being the Red Lord's spy. Zavia leaps to his defense, but there is no need, for the high chief himself sees the truth; touched by the poignancy of the song, Simir understands that no one could sing with such heartfelt sadness and be the Red Lord's man. He tells Alaric what the other nomads already know — that he was once the Red Lord's man, but he left the valley after his own wife was tortured to death. And he is not the only one among the nomads who has lost a loved one to the Red Lord. From time to time, nomad youths have gone to the valley seeking medicinal herbs, and few of them have ever returned. Alaric was lucky, the nomads say, and only he knows that there was no luck involved, not for a minstrel with a witch's power.

Briefly, Alaric lives an idyll with Zavia. But soon, Simir's sons decide they will

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tolerate him no more, and they challenge him to fight any one of them. Alaric resists their goading, and so, in the middle of the night, they burst into Zavia's tent, knives seeking him. Thanks to his witch's power, Alaric escapes in the darkness and confusion, then — to keep his power secret — pretends he was not in the tent when they entered. To punish them for their attack, Simir beats his sons, even though they are nearly grown men.

Zavia does not believe Alaric's version of the disturbance; she thinks he used magic to escape the three youths. And she is no stranger to magic, for she is the daughter of Kata, the witch of the northern people. When she cannot coax Alaric into admitting what really happened, she tells her mother the tale, and Kata calls Alaric to her tent to determine the truth. There she drugs, hypnotizes, and seduces him, and when she has done so, she knows everything about him. And she claims him, in some strange, mystical fashion that he can feel in his bones but not understand. The experience frightens him, makes him want to run from her, and suddenly his passion for Zavia and his friendship for Simir no longer seem so strong as they once were, now that they must be balanced against his fear of Kata.

Late that night, Alaric tries to talk to Simir about that fear. But he has scarcely begun, when the two of them are attacked by three men. In the ensuing melee, with the darkness his ally, Alaric uses his special power to bedevil the attackers and help Simir beat them to the ground. A torch reveals that the three men are Simir's sons. Cold with anger, Simir sentences the younger ones to banishment, and the eldest, the ringleader, to be taken to the Red Lord's valley, tied to a tree, and left for the tyrant's pleasure. Then he asks Alaric to be his son in their stead.

Kata brings a cup of the Elixir of Life, which the nomads drink when they reach adulthood, and offers it to Alaric to seal the adoption. And at that moment he realizes that his new life in the north, and his feelings for its people, are far stronger than his fear of her. He drinks, and decides to stay.

Simir himself leads the party bound for the Red Lord's domain; and when he and his companions return, there are nine strangers with them. Alaric recognizes the newcomers, for he met them during his own journey away from the valley — they are fugitives from the Red Lord's torture chamber, who have been hiding and starving in the mountains. Now Simir's band will take them in, as it once took in Simir.

The leader of the fugitives, a broken, frustrated man, eventually chooses to vent his frustration on Alaric, attacking him without warning. Alaric has no choice but to use his witch's power to save his life, in full view of dozens of people. Instead of being frightened by the sight, though, as the folk of the south would be, the nomads accept Alaric's power as a good and useful skill. They begin speaking of him with a respect formerly reserved for Kata, their own witch.

Kata's jealously is aroused. To reassert her superiority, she demands that Alaric accompany her, as a servant, to a strange and magical land that lies in the far north. If he goes, however, he must promise not to use his special power on the journey, for it might damage the magic they will be seeking there. Hoping to make his peace with her in this way, he agrees. They take four other men along, all of whom have made the trek with Kata before.

It is a long and arduous journey, through weird mountains made of lodestone,

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and up onto the vast ice sheet that is the landscape of the farther north. Alaric travels it as the others do, true to his promise, but when one of his companions falls into a crevasse, he must use his witch's power to save him. Even so, the man seems to be dead, until Kata's herbal skills bring him back to life.

Kata is furious with Alaric for breaking his promise, but he points to her success in raising the dead as proof that no harm has been done. He realizes that she is more affronted than worried, and in the course of their argument, he manages to convince her that he has no wish to usurp her authority. As they resume their northward journey, Kata decides that their proper relationship should be that of master and acolyte. Alaric protests that her magic is not for him, but she will not listen. And when they finally reach their goal — where the plants she will brew into the Elixir of Life grow on the bare ice — she is even more firmly convinced of his destiny, for he has a sudden intense, mystical vision of the net of magic power that encompasses the world, and of himself as a part of it.

After they harvest the plants, she allows Alaric to use his special skill to shorten their journey back to Simir's band.

THE DEER WERE restless. With the arrival of autumn, the bucks had begun to shed the velvet of their antlers and challenge each other with tossing heads. The season of rut had arrived. For its brief duration the nomads settled by a stream where the trees grew thick and the fish bit readily. It was a leisurely time for the band, a time when there was no need for packing and unpacking, for setting up or striking tents. A time for Alaric to laze by Simir's fire and sing and talk and laugh.

His position among the nomads had changed. Word of his quarrel with Kata had spread quickly, and the general understanding, according to Simir, was that Alaric had tried to cross her, and failed.

"Your dunking in the crevasse seems to have been a punishment," the high chief told him. "And now you are her servant completely, with your power at her disposal." He grinned. "Or so Kata says."

"I won't dispute it," said Alaric, flashing a smile.

So he was no longer just the minstrel with a thousand songs, and no longer the new witch from the south, either. Instead, he was Kata's man. There was a new kind of respect in the nomads' eyes when they looked at him now. And the women stopped pestering him for his magic, because it

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was no longer his to give, but their own witch's.

But as Kata's man, he had new responsibilities, most of them requiring that he visit her tent often. He was never easy there, amid the sweetly scented smoke, but he always answered her call, carrying her messages or fetching her food. And every time he did her service, she urged him to sit for a while and learn, for his good and the nomads', and for her own future glory. He would be the greatest witch of the north, she insisted, and he and his teacher would be remembered forever.

He put her off and put her off, but nothing he said kept her from asking, from urging, from almost pleading.

Even Simir thought he should give the offer serious consideration. "We can use another witch among us," he said.

Sometimes, alone with his own thoughts, deep in the night when all the camp was sleeping, Alaric wondered himself what he should do. He could not forget the vision that had come to him on the ice, but did it mean what Kata said? Or was it simply an experience, no more significant than any other of his twenty summers? He had been a minstrel so long, no other life seemed proper, and no other had ever attracted him. To change it for something else seemed a betrayal of the first person who had ever been kind to him, his long-dead mentor Dall. Yet a witch of Kata's sort was more valuable to her people, with her healing herbs and potions, than any minstrel. What did it matter if some of her knowledge seemed like superstitious gibberish? Some of it was real enough. She had chosen him, above all others, to carry that knowledge into the future, and everyone, it seemed, agreed with her choice.

Everyone but Zavia.

"Why should she choose you over me?" She hadn't needed Alaric to give her the news; she had heard it by the day after his return. She had brought it back to her tent with their breakfast, and her anger along with it.

"I told her she should choose you," Alaric said softly.

"What have I ever meant to her? Nothing! An inconvenience left over from her youth!" Her face was flushed, and tears brimmed in her eyes. "Blood of her blood, but less than nothing!"

Alaric tried to take her in his arms, but she pushed him away.

"And what are you?" she shouted. "A stranger, come to take what belongs to me!"

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"I don't want it."

"You will! Don't think it won't look good to you during the winter. That's the *real* time of magic. You'll see what she does, and how they all worship her for it, and you'll want it!"

"Dear Zavia." He circled her with his arms again, and this time he held tight till she stopped struggling and let her head droop onto his shoulder. "All I want is you," he whispered. "And as many times as she says yes, I'll say no."

"Don't lie to me," she sobbed against his neck.

He kissed her hair, her cheek, the corner of her mouth. He tasted her tears. "I'm not lying," he murmured.

Her lips opened against his, and then she pulled him down on the cushions, fiercely.

But even as their bodies clung together, Alaric found himself wondering what it was that he really wanted.

By the time the rutting season was over, the first snows had begun to fly — thin, sporadic snows, airy flakes melting when they touched the yellowing grass, but a presage of time to come. The band had been moving on for only a few days when the first of the bucks shed his antlers, and the other males soon did the same. The shed horn provided a welcome bounty that the nomads transformed into spoons and knife-hilts and needles.

Not long after, all the deer began to lose the dark tips of their coat hairs, becoming as pale as straw, as if the cold wind from the north were bleaching them out for the season of whiteness. Soon flurries of snow became more common, and the flakes began to gather on the rolling land, untouched by a sun that, more and more often, seemed only a smear of brightness in the gray sky. The days shortened steadily, and the nights turned bitter, and seldom were the stars visible for the heavy cloud cover. Winter settled firmly over the northern plain.

Still the nomads moved on in their great circuit of the land, the circuit that would bring them, come spring, back to the ingathering and renewal of the calving grounds.

It was a stormy time. The snow, once it was well begun, blew hard for days on end and piled deep, so that soon everyone had to wear the awkward, thong-webbed hoops. But the deer could not wear this footgear, and in spite of their own broad hooves, they sank into the drifting whiteness

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and floundered when they walked. When at last the snow grew so deep that they could no longer reach the frozen grass, the nomads took turns scooping it aside with shovels of hard-cured leather. It was heavy work; but the deer had to eat, for in winter, more than any other time, they were the life and livelihood of the band.

In the warm months, hunting and fishing and gathering of edible plants had been the nomads' main source of food. With the advent of the winter storms, the plants disappeared beneath the snow, and the hunters came home empty-handed more often than not. Tracks that would have shown well in the whiteness on calm days were quickly filled in by the wind, and the pale coats that so many creatures acquired with the season made them nearly invisible through a veil of blowing flakes. Fishing, too, offered little return, for the rivers were frozen over, and even when the ice was broken and lines could be dropped through the gaps, the fish seemed to hide from the bait. Still, they ate well enough, for a large buck could feed the entire band for a day or two. The nomads expected to slaughter a goodly number of their deer over the course of the winter.

As the season wore on, though, it became clear to Alaric that they had not expected to slaughter so many so quickly. In an ordinary winter, there would have been game for the cooking pots fairly often, in spite of white coats and snow. In an ordinary winter, there would have been crisp, windless days, days when the snow left off and the land was silent and sparkling under the heatless sun. But this was no ordinary winter; it was not merely a bad one, but the worst in memory.

In her tent and out of it, with sweetly scented smoke and acrid, with herbs cast upon the wind and strange words shouted into it, Kata worked her weather magic. And sometimes there would be a lull in the storm, and smiling hunters coming home with rabbits or foxes. But more often she offered her witchcraft to an unheeding Pole Star, and another buck died that the nomads might live.

It seemed odd — and foolish — to Alaric that the hunters thanked Kata for the few good days but did not curse her for the bad. This was the real test of her power, he thought, this savage season, and she was failing it, even though her people did not appear to see that.

"A hard winter," the men would say, huddled about the fire. "But how much worse it would be if we had no Kata."

He said nothing, but he knew she read the doubt in his eyes, for she

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left off pleading with him to be her acolyte. She had no more time for teaching anyway, being busy with her charms against the storm. Sometimes, when he came away from serving her, hunters would ask if she were working her weather magic, and he always told them, honestly, that she was. Sometimes, too, a hunter would go into her tent and stay some long time, in hopes of renewing his own personal hunting magic. Alaric never saw that it did much good, though, no matter how long the hunter stayed.

Quietly, he began to hunt on his own. In the south, where the snows were mild and the game plentiful, he sought the small wild deer, killing as he had always killed, by his special stealth and with his knife. Of all the band's hunters, he was the one who came home most consistently with meat. While he hunted, his venison fed Simir's own circle, and that much more of the tame meat was left for everyone else.

One night, after eating Alaric's venison and listening to his songs, the high chief went into Kata's tent. At first, Alaric supposed that he was renewing his own hunting magic, but shortly he stepped out and beckoned to Alaric to join him.

Inside, Kata's own small blaze warmed the air enough that his breath did not turn to frost as it left his mouth. She herself bent over the flames, staring into them as if seeking the future in their flickering dance. For a time she did not speak, nor did Simir, and the tent was so silent that the crackle of the flames seemed loud against the constant wail of the wind.

She raised her head at last, her pale eyes red-rimmed with lack of sleep. She had put all her energy into her magic, and Alaric could not help feeling a pang of pity for her at the little return she had won for so much effort.

"I warned them it would be a hard winter," she said.

"All winters are hard," said Simir, his voice low.

"They should have prepared themselves better. They should have dried fish and game and stored roots. I warned them."

"We had eightscore mouths to feed, Kata." There was uneasiness in his tone. "We had no excess to put away."

"You should have found some."

Simir glanced at Alaric. "In all my time in the north, there has never been a winter like this. Always, we've been able to hunt in the snow. Always."

"Fool," said Kata.

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Alaric looked from Simir's face to hers. "But there are still plenty of deer in the herd. And the storms will surely stop sometime and allow good hunting."

"Will they?" said Kata.

Simir shook his head. "We must face the possibility that the hunting will remain poor. Perhaps for the rest of the winter. We have deer now, but the time may come when we must begin to slaughter the breeding stock." He frowned into the flames. "It *is* a bad winter, but if we eat all our deer and live through it, what will we eat in the worst of next year? Snow?" He clenched his big fists. "Kata is right, as always. This is my fault. I should have driven them. It means our lives." Then he looked full at Alaric. "But if the high chief has failed his people, their witch has not. Her magic will save us."

Alaric tried not to let his doubts show on his face, though he didn't think he was very successful at it. "How?"

"It has brought you to us."

Alaric glanced sidelong at Kata and stifled the impulse to say, *Has it!*

"Long ago," said Kata, "when I knew the winter would be hard, I asked the Pole Star to help us. *He* has never failed his people. And you are his answer."

Alaric shook his head. "I'm a good hunter, in my way, but I can't feed 160 mouths day after day. The deer of the south are small, and they hide well, even for one with my skills—"

"For *one*," said Kata sharply. "But not for a dozen."

"A dozen?"

"You carried five people and their goods far across the ice. Why not a dozen hunters to the south, to hunt the game that lives there, and bring back meat to keep all our bellies full?"

Alaric stared at her for a moment, and then, very slowly, as her notion blossomed in his imagination, he smiled. To carry hunters to the southern forest — it was a possibility that had never occurred to him. In the south, where witches were feared, he had rarely dared to use his power to transport other human beings. But in the north, where magic was welcome, he could fly them to the hunt, as giant eagles had done for the heroes of legend in half a dozen songs.

"I am a fool, Lady," he said at last, "but you, as always, are wisdom itself. Command me, and we begin tomorrow."

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Kata nodded. "I command you."

Wise as it was, Kata's plan contained a flaw. Though the men Simir selected were eager to travel by magic to a land of plentiful game, they were accustomed to rolling, treeless plains; they found themselves confused and uneasy in the forests of the south, their hunting skills a poor match to the new landscape. Time and again, their stealthy footsteps were given away by dead twigs crackling underfoot, or their arrows were deflected by low-hanging branches. Only occasionally would one rise above his deficiencies and kill a rabbit, a raccoon, or a fox.

It was Alaric who caught the real game — the white-tail deer, the wild pigs, and even a young bear once. While his hunters crept cautiously through the forest, he flitted from tree to tree like a ghost. In stepless silence, he visited springs and creeks, and thickets where the last berries of autumn still clung to leafless branches, and copses where tender twiglets drooped within reach of hungry deer. Yet, even with his power, the hunt was never easy. The afternoons were longer in the south, but still Alaric found himself using every scrap of daylight they offered. When he made a kill, he carried it to that day's camp, then returned to meet his hunters at their rendezvous. If any of them had game, he took that north and then he came back for the men. And after leaving them with their families, he often returned to the forest during the southern twilight, to stalk again in his own special way, for eightscore mouths made short shrift of rabbits, raccoons, and the small deer of the south.

He had never used his power so much. He found himself tired at the end of the day, so tired that sometimes, as darkness descended on the south, he wanted to lie down in the forest and sleep, except that he knew folk were waiting for him at the nomad camp. Often, when he returned, he was too exhausted to eat the very game he had killed. Zavia complained that he no longer had any time for her, but he just shook his head to that. He had put her aside necessarily, as he had put his lute aside. Hunting was more important now; he could see it in Simir's eyes, in Kata's, in the eyes of his hunters. With their failure, he knew it was he, the minstrel from the south, who stood between Simir's band and death.

"Perhaps it would be simpler," he said one night at the high chief's fire, when the wind roared and the snow whipped downward, making the flames sputter, "if I just took you all to better lands in the south."

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The gathered nomads' only answer was a silence so profound that he did not attempt to bring the matter up again.

Truth to tell, tired as he was and hard-worked as he was, part of him was glad that the other hunters failed so often. Part of him was proud to be the lifeline of the band. No one had ever truly depended on him before, not for more than an evening's music.

Perhaps it was his pride that made him push himself to his limits, that blinded him to his fatigue. No matter how weary he was, he had no trouble hunting, no trouble carrying his quarry and the hunters back to the north, and no trouble returning for another hunt almost every evening. But one night, as the southern sky purpled and the first stars rose opposite the sunset, when the shadows were deep and each tree seemed a many-armed sentinel standing guard over the forest, he spied what seemed to be a small bear crouching beside a boulder. He had killed a very young bear once before, and as he watched this one, all he could think was how many stomachs it would fill. Knife in hand, he flitted to it to strike before it saw him. But when he struck, it reared up suddenly to a great height, roaring — not a young bear by any means, but a full-grown male, much taller than any man, and heavy as six or seven of the nomad hunters. Before Alaric could recover from his astonishment, before his exhausted mind could even think, the wounded beast batted him aside with the back of a huge paw.

The blow was like a log striking him square across the chest. It knocked him a dozen paces and drove the breath from his lungs. Darkness spun sickeningly about him, blotting out the twilit sky and the sentinel trees. He clutched at the ground, at the dead leaves of summer under their crisp snow cover, but could not force the wild dance of blackness to stop. He tried to breathe, but there was terrible pain in his chest that kept the air from sliding down his throat. In the silence of unbreathing, he could hear the pounding of blood like a great mallet inside his skull. And above that, the growl of the bear as it shuffled toward him. The beast, the darkness — they seemed one to him, one vast living thing that was reaching out to crush and swallow him.

Where! he thought, struggling to see but failing. Failing to breathe, failing to move, as if his body no longer belonged to him. And with all his failures, another darkness began to grow inside him, as if bursting from his very heart, and greedily rushed to join the darkness outside. *Where!* he

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thought frantically, his mind drowning in black and icy water. *Where?*

And then the bear's claws raked him, and, not knowing the answer, he leaped to escape that burning, freezing agony.

When the darkness finally loosed its grip on him, the first thing he noticed was the smell. It was sweet, smoky, familiar, though he could not place it. Sometime later he realized that his eyes were open, and that light flickered and danced before them — flame-light, though he could not bring the flames into focus. Later still, a cup was placed against his lips, and an oily liquid seeped into his mouth. Like the smell, it also seemed familiar. A low, soothing voice bade him swallow, and he obeyed.

He slept then. He knew he slept, because he found himself playing the lute while falling snow spangled its strings, and he knew that he must be dreaming because he would never allow such a thing to happen in waking life. And when he woke, the scent and the light and the oily liquid were with him once more.

"Drink," said the voice, and he drank.

"Sleep," said the voice, and he slept.

How much time had passed before he finally came to himself, he could not guess, not even how many times he had drunk and slept. But at last he woke and knew that he lay in Kata's tent, and that the drink was the Elixir of Life.

"So," she said, bending over him with the cup. "You've said no to death at last."

He drank again. There was another cup for him afterward, of venison broth, rich and meaty. "Have I been dead, then?" His own voice startled him, so weak and hoarse did it sound.

"Near enough."

He tried to shift his body under the furs that covered him, and he caught his breath sharply at the sudden pain that lanced through his chest.

"Lie still," she said. "You've more cracked ribs than you'd want to think about, and you're half-flayed about the back. You'll carry the marks of those claws to your grave, I think."

Gingerly, he curled his hands to his middle and felt the broad leather bands that wrapped him from armpit to hip. "I came back," he whispered.

"And brought a fat bear-claw with you, sliced clean off his body. He was a big one."

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"Yes."

"You were foolish to try to take him."

"Yes."

She smiled just a little. "But brave."

"No," he whispered. "Just foolish." He closed his eyes again, for keeping them open seemed suddenly more effort than he could manage. "How long before I can hunt again?"

He felt her hand on his forehead, firm and cool. "Don't think of hunting now, my Alaric."

"But I must," he said, and the words were barely audible, even to his own ears.

"You must sleep. Think of nothing else. Just sleep."

When he woke again, he was being laid on a litter lashed between two deer. Above him the sky was gray and lowering, and snowflakes danced in the air. Kata and Grem, their clothing dusted with whiteness, were wrapping him in furs and winding thongs about him to secure him to the litter.

He tried to rise on one elbow, but the pain in his chest was too much. "Have we moved while I slept?"

Kata nodded. "And will again."

He sighed, and it was deep enough to hurt his ribs. Since childhood he had always known exactly where he was. His mental map stretched back unbroken along his travels, with every mile, every step of the way, engraved in his deepest memory. Now there would be a blank — these miles of sleeping movement would be lost to him. But there was no help for it; this was the nomad life, and he had no right to ask that it be altered for his convenience. He sighed again, and could not keep from groaning with the pain, and then Kata gave him another draft of Elixir, and he slept.

THERE WAS a change in the nomads' routine while Alaric lay wounded. Instead of traveling every morning and camping every noon, they traveled through the whole brief day and camped for all the next. Simir had suggested it, as a way to let the hunters roam farther. It meant that his people were exhausted at the end of each long struggle against the wind and snow, so exhausted that they had no strength left to cook and were forced to eat half-frozen venison left from the previous day's meals. But it also meant that they had time to recover, time to huddle in their tents and be warm and send out the hardiest to hunt.

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Simir brought Alaric the news of their hunting success.

"They say you challenged them," he said, kneeling by the pallet in Kata's tent. "But I think you shamed them into trying harder where they know the land."

"I never meant to shame them," Alaric whispered.

"Yet it was the right thing, in the end. Now they fight for their pride."

Kata nodded. "They must show they have no need of your magic."

"Perhaps there's just more game where we are now," Alaric said. "I know we've turned south."

Simir shrugged. "Whatever the reason, we're slaughtering fewer deer."

Alaric looked at Kata. "It's your magic, Lady. That's the real reason."

She gave him gaze for gaze. "Of course," she said.

When Simir had gone, she brought her star-scattered box out, and at first he thought she was going to dose him with more Elixir, but no. She wanted to talk to him about the dancing points of power in the Great Waste.

He held his hand up before a dozen words had escaped her lips. "Lady, I am too weak for this. It is a deep mystery, not for the muzzy-minded."

"Yet these are good days for your schooling, my Alaric. You must stay in my tent till I call you well enough to ride, and what better time to begin you apprenticeship?"

"Please. I am not ready."

She looked at him long then, and at last she put the box away in its sack. "I cannot force you to learn," she murmured.

He nodded, closing his eyes. "I'll know when the time comes."

"Don't be a fool, my Alaric," he heard her whisper. "Don't let my magic slip away from you."

Her magic, he thought as he drifted on the fringes of sleep. Her magic, real and delusion.

He dreamed that he passed his hand over her fire, and the flames turned every color of the rainbow. And people came to him, men he had sparred with and women whose cooking he had tasted; they came to him and crowded all around. And they told him, over and over again, that he was the greatest witch of the north. But then, jostling its way through the crowd as if it were just another human being, came his lute, calling his name in a high, singing voice, and weeping, weeping, for all his abandoned songs.

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* * *

Zavia came to see him at last. He was sitting up by then, though his ribs still ached if he moved too quickly. He had not caught the slightest glimpse of her since his wounding, not even during the times that he lay on his litter between the deer.

She knelt by his pallet, but scarcely half her attention was for him; she kept casting furtive glances at her mother on the other side of the fire. "How are you feeling, my Alaric?"

He smiled at her. "Better, now that I see you."

"I would have come sooner, but it seemed wise to let you rest."

He reached out and took her hand. "Sometimes a beloved face is better healing than rest."

Her lips tightened, and so did her fingers on his. "Don't you think it's time he moved back to my tent, Mother?" she said. "He claims so much of *you here. I can look after him now.*"

"No," said Kata. "He stays with me."

Alaric looked past her shoulder, his eyes meeting Kata's. "May we have a little time alone together, Lady? There are things we wish to say, for no other ears than our own. Please."

Kata frowned slightly. "She will tire you."

"I won't let her."

"Mark me, any exercise will give you pain and slow your healing. You'll regret it."

"We'll talk, no more. I promise."

Her eyes narrowed. "So you'd drive me out of my own tent, would you?"

"Lady, I would go myself, if I could."

Kata rose to her feet, drawing a fur about her shoulders. "Very well," she said. "But she *will* tire you, even with mere talk. She shall not stay long." And she swept out of the tent, leaving the flap a trifle ajar behind her, so that a thin sifting of snow blew in.

Zavia crawled to the opening and looked through it for a few heartbeats before lacing it fast. "How she hates me," she muttered. "Nothing I do pleases her. And everything *you* do does."

"Not everything," Alaric said ruefully. "She wasn't pleased that I nearly killed myself."

"You think not?" She scrambled back to his side. "Don't be a fool, Alaric. This pleases her more than anything else. Now she has you to

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herself, every day and every night. How much has she taught you in these days and nights of *rest*?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" Disbelief showed in her face. "But you are the new acolyte. You are the hope of her future." The words had a hard and bitter edge to them. "You are the one who pleases her more than the child of her body." Her fists clenched, and she looked down and away from him.

He laid a hand on her knee. "You are her rightful acolyte, my Zavia. But I can't force her to teach you."

"You could. By following Simir instead of her. Let him train you for chieftainship; he wants it as a starving man wants meat. You could be the next high chief, and I would be the next witch. We could work together for the good of the people, as Simir and Kata do now. Better!"

Alaric stroked her knee, then sighed so deeply that his chest ached. "Zavia, you think too far ahead. No one knows what the future may bring."

"You *want* to be her acolyte, don't you?"

"*She* wants it. I'm not sure I want anything. Except, perhaps . . . my lute. I'd play you a song if I had it, and we could stop thinking about magic and chieftainship and even winter. A song about springtime and flowers and love. That's all I want."

She looked at him once more. "Is it, truly?"

"And you." He raised his hand from her knee and beckoned her to bend closer. "Come here, my Zavia. I've missed you."

But instead of leaning toward him, she pushed herself to her feet. "I mustn't tire you. I have your lute safe. I'll see you get it." She took one sidelong step toward the entry.

"Zavia, don't go. Stay with me till your mother comes."

She shook her head. "I have work to do."

"Then give me a kiss, at least, to help me heal."

She turned from him to reach for the entry laces. "No," she said. "Later, when you come out of this tent. If you ever do."

A gust of cold air marked her departure. Shortly afterward, Kata returned. She carried his lute.

For the time he remained in Kata's tent, Zavia did not visit him again. But Simir did. Sometimes he brought food from his own pot for the healer and the invalid; sometimes he merely came to make some inquiry of Kata.

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Sometimes he even admitted that he was there just to see Alaric, and to listen to whatever slight song the minstrel had strength for. But Alaric fancied that when the high chief and his witch looked at each other, he could see the rivalry in their faces — the rivalry for him.

What do I want? he wondered, after one of Simir's visits. He watched Kata at her fire; the leaves of that strange northern plant had dried hard and crisp above those flames, and now she was grinding them to powder. She had tried to intrigue him with some talk about the proper treatment of the leaves, but he had shaken his head and plucked at the lute to discourage her.

"I am too much of a burden to you," he said. "Let one of Simir's circle look after my recovery. He'll be glad to have me in his tent."

"You are no burden," she replied. "And you wouldn't get enough rest in his tent. You would sing too much. Leave off the lute now, Alaric; your ribs must ache."

He did leave off his plucking, but he kept the lute close in his arms. *What shall I do?* he wondered. He thought of Kata's mystical stars and her shining web of power that encompassed the world. He thought of Simir, unflagging, leading his people on their great circuit of the north. He thought of Zavia, yearning, always yearning, for what her mother would not give. No matter what he chose, someone would be displeased.

What shall I do?

The winter seemed to go on forever. Day by day the period of sunlight shining wanly through the clouds was shorter. For a time, Alaric thought that, just as there had been no night at all in the far north, there might at last be no day on the snow-swept plain. But he was wrong; the day shrank and shrank, but reached a limit, poised there awhile, and then began slowly to expand. Midwinter Day had passed.

On one of those newly longer days, Alaric walked out of Kata's tent for the first time since his wounding. He did not walk far, only to Simir's fire, but he did it with just the slightest support from Grem. Still, he was out of breath at the end of it, and his trembling legs ached almost as much as his ribs. Grem helped him to a mound of carpets near the flames and made certain he was well wrapped in his furs.

There were men gathered about the fire who Alaric would have expected to be hunting on such a fine day. They were talking to each other

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with much animation, as if something unusual had just happened. Not, he thought, his own appearance, for they seemed to pay little attention to his hobbling journey.

He looked questioningly at Simir.

"A good day for you to be outside," said the high chief. "I was afraid you might have to miss the ceremony."

"Ceremony?"

"Yes, on the first clear day after Midwinter, we celebrate the sun's return. Now I must leave you here. Grem will fetch more furs and a hot drink if you get cold."

"I'm comfortable," Alaric said.

With a last nod, Simir strode back to Kata's tent and disappeared inside.

Alaric watched the bustle grow steadily all around him. It was not the bustle of packing that he had seen so often. Indeed, it seemed to accomplish nothing at all; it was simply movement and noise, a restless excitement. Even Grem, assigned to look after him, could not sit still, but bobbed up and down constantly, hurrying off to talk to people, coming back with an apologetic smile on his face, and then hurrying away once more. Alaric caught fragments of passing conversations, but all that he could make out was a sort of universal concern over who would be next to whom. As if they were all going to line up, every person in the band, and they were trying to determine precedence.

The sun stood at is low, wintry noon, when a hush fell upon the milling nomads, and all faces turned toward Kata's tent. Simir had come out and was holding the entry flap aside. Then Kata emerged — but a Kata transformed. Gone were her skirt and jerkin of leather, gone her boots and even her armlets. She was dressed instead in nothing but a sleeveless shift of plain white wool. Her hair fell loose to her waist, her only cloak. Her feet were bare. With a firm step, without a sign of shivering, she crossed the camp, passing Simir's fire, but sparing not a glance for Alaric sitting there. As she walked, the nomads fell in behind her, men, women, and children, silent and purposeful. As the tail of the crowd surged by, Grem helped Alaric to his feet, and they followed a few paces behind the rest.

They did not go far, only just beyond the tents, where a wide circular space in the snow had been stamped flat. The nomads settled all around its rim, their seats the snow itself, no carpets here. Grem and Alaric

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squeezed between a gray-haired matron and a young woman with a baby in her arms.

Kata stood in the center of the circle. When everyone was seated, she lifted hier arms as if for silence, though there was no need for any such signal. No human voice had been raised, not even a child's cry. Still, she lifted her arms and waited. Alaric saw then that her eyes were glazed, and that she did not look at anyone, but up into the sky, to the north, where the Pole Star would have shone, had the sky been dark.

She spoke at last, her arms still upraised, and her voice was strong and ringing, as if she were giving commands. But her words were the words of a tale Alaric had never heard before:

"Long ago, in the morning of time, the people lived in a warm and green place, where the sun had cared for them since first they opened their eyes. And life was sweet in that place, in the care of that good and generous sun. But the people were wanderers in their hearts, and at last they turned their backs on that green place, and on that good sun, and set out into the Great Night to find another home.

"Their journey was long, for the darkness was vast, and homelands were as tiny and lost in it as flowers on the grassy plain. But the Pole Star had looked upon them in that darkness, and, finding them worthy, he claimed them for his own, and guided them safe to this sun and this place. Yet when they came to their new home, it was not a land such as they had known before. No, it was a land strange and beautiful, a land where magic grew in every meadow, and flowed in every river, and breathed in the very wind. And foolishly, they destroyed that magic, and made the land over in the image of their old home, which they had left so far behind in the Great Night. And they were happy in their new home, not understanding what they had done.

"But the Pole Star, who loved them in spite of their folly, preserved that magic in a few hidden places, and laid a net of his own power over land and sea, that the magic might be protected and perpetuated, forever living. And the Pole Star gave the knowledge of that magic to those who chose to dwell in his own favored domain, to hold and to use to ease their hardships. For they are wanderers, as the people were once wanderers every one, and the Pole Star had claimed them before all others. And the sign of that gift is the promise of the sun — that no matter how great the night grows, there will always be a dawn.

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"Now the sun pushes back the night, redeeming the land. Now we give the Pole Star our gift in return for his."

At that, she ripped her shift top to bottom and cast it off to stand naked and pale in the center of the circle. The snow might have been grass beneath her feet, the cold wind a summer zephyr, for all the heed she paid them.

Simir went to her then, and placed a short-bladed knife in one of her outstretched hands. Her fingers closed upon it, and then, with a swift, graceful motion, she bent downward and slashed at her thigh. So sharp was the knife at first not even a line showed at the cut, but slowly the red blood began to well outward and trickle down her pale flesh; and as the first dark droplets reached the hard-packed snow, she slashed again, at the other thigh, and at her calves and her ankles, too, till the blood ran in narrow ribbons down both legs. Holding the knife high then, she began a slow, shuffling dance, and her feet smeared the redness from her veins over the pure white of winter.

After watching her for some moments, Simir tossed his own clothes aside, and, with another knife, he slashed his own legs. As the blood ran down his calves, he joined Kata in her dance.

That was the signal for the rest. In twos and threes they stripped their clothes away and stepped into the circle to slash their legs and dance. Old men and young. Women with babes in their naked arms. Even children of five or six winters. Only the youngest stayed at the circle's edge, watching their elders with big, round eyes. Only the youngest, and Alaric.

They can't expect me to join, he told himself, as Grem merged with the slowly wheeling throng. *I'm not well enough to dance a dozen steps, let alone lose blood to the snow.* He shivered at the thought of the cold wind against his naked flesh, the cold snow beneath his naked feet, the cold steel. *But could I?* he wondered, *even if I were well?*

There was no signal to end the dance, but after a time that seemed impossibly long to Alaric, the participants began to drift outward, to find their clothing, and to become, once more, people who felt the winter wind. Soon Grem returned, smiling, as so many of the others were now smiling, as at some marvelous pleasure. He helped Alaric back to Simir's fire, where a thin stew had been left to warm over the low flames, and as they ate, Alaric could not keep his eyes from straying toward the dancing ground, where Kata still swayed and bled. She was the last remaining

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figure; after all the rest had put on their clothes and gone, she danced on, while Simir waited nearby, her shift hung over his arm.

She stopped finally, and let the high chief wrap her in the meager cloth and lead her to her tent. A short time later she sent word that Alaric might come back, and when he went in, he found her fully dressed and bent near the fire with her powders and potions. She dosed him then with the mild form of the Elixir of Life, the form without the sleep inducer.

"You were out in the cold too long," she said.

He had to smile. "*I?*"

"You should have gone into Simir's tent."

"I was warm enough. I was wearing considerably more than you were."

She cast some powder into the fire, and sweet smoke wafted up from it. "If you can stay away from the bears, perhaps next year you will be ready to join the Star Ceremony."

He gave her a long look. "I'm not sure I'll ever be ready for it."

"You might be surprised. Simir was a stranger, and he was ready the first year he came to us."

"Simir is a much stronger man than I."

She shook her head. "It is not a matter of strength. Didn't you see the children dancing? Do you think they are stronger than you? It is an ecstasy, my Alaric. When you have given yourself completely to the north, you'll understand it."

"I *have* given myself to the north. I can't imagine how much more complete the giving can be."

She smiled just a little. "Can't you?"

He looked away from her. "Lady, my heart is here."

"The north asks more of you than your heart, my Alaric. It is time, and past time, to begin your instruction."

He sighed. "You have been kind to me. I am grateful, believe me. But . . . the life you offer doesn't seem to call me."

"You must listen harder, then." She caught his chin in her hand and turned his face to hers. "Don't deny your nature, Alaric. The Pole Star has made you what you are, and brought you here for this."

He saw the hunger in her eyes, as naked as her body had been during the Star Ceremony, and he understood well that she yearned for him as Zavia yearned for her magic. "Don't press me, Lady, I beg you," he whispered.

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She held him then, with her gaze and her strong fingers. "Do not be afraid, my Alaric. You have much to learn, but you will do well; I know it."

He tried to shake his head, but it scarcely moved, so firm was her grip. "It is not fear that holds me back; it is a dream. Surely you believe in the power of dreams."

Her pale eyes were steady. "A witch can never discount the importance of dreams." Her hand released his chin, settled lightly on his shoulder. "Tell me of it."

"It was some nights ago, but I can't seem to forget it. In the dream, my lute was a living creature, and it cried out for me; it even wept for the loss of me, because I had become something other than its master." He hesitated. "There was a large crowd around me, people who thought I belonged to them, and the lute pushed its way through them to find me."

She looked at him a long, long moment, seemed to peer into his very marrow. Then she slid her fingers along his neck, and down the line of his jaw, till they finally slipped off the point of his chin. She turned away from him, turned her back and stood very straight and stiff, her arms at her sides. She seemed to sway just a little, like a blade of grass teased by mild summer air.

"There is much wisdom to be found in dreams," she said at last.

When she turned to Alaric once more, her jade eyes betrayed nothing, but one hand reached out and gently ruffled his hair. "It seems that you know your own mind." She sighed very softly, and yet the sound seemed to fill her tent, as the scent of sweet spice filled it, every corner, every crevice.

And within Alaric, something answered that sigh, and a deeply buried knot loosened itself and came free.

"Perhaps it would be best if you moved to Simir's tent," Kata added, as if it were a trifle.

"As you say, Lady," he murmured.

Her hand dropped away from him. "I'll call Grem to help you."

SIMIR'S TENT was a hub of activity, meeting hall by day and barracks for his closest advisers by night. Alaric did not rest so well there as in Kata's quiet shelter, but he was happy to make the move, happy to be free of the scented smoke and the colored flames, and of her pale, watchful eyes. He sang a good deal more in Simir's tent, and so his ribs ached more, but he could not help thinking the trade was well worth the price.

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In time he was able to straddle a deer again. In time — though it took longer than he would have guessed — his strength returned, and he began to think of hunting. The winter storms had diminished, but game on the plains was scarcely plentiful; though the nomads tried to conserve their deer, still the herd dwindled steadily — now they began to slaughter does and yearlings, for the breeding population of bucks was getting low. When an old man died in spite of Kata's potions, there were few who mourned him long, even among his close kin, for his death meant one less belly to fill. The hunters ranged far, sometimes for days at a time, while behind their backs a graybeard or two predicted that there would be nothing left of the herd come spring.

Simir did not want him to go. But he went at last anyway, exercising his witch's power like a cramped muscle, leaping to the horizon in a single heartbeat, and leaping as far again and again, till he found the mountains. A brief sweep along their lower slopes brought him to a familiar area, telling him precisely where, in the map of his life, that day's camp lay. He moved south then in one bound, to his forest hunting ground. The small buck he killed there seemed heavy to his unaccustomed muscles, but he made no complaint as he dropped it beside Simir's fire. He did promise, though, as he began to dress it out, that he would not try for bear again.

He ranged southward almost daily after that. But as many times as he went, he never offered to carry other hunters with him, and neither Simir nor Kata ever suggested it. It was enough for them, he understood, that he was willing to go himself.

He also resumed his duties as Kata's man — helping her pack, carrying messages, fetching her food. Now, though, she said little to him at those times; and that, he thought, was just as well, for he would not have been able to answer her words any more than he could answer the reproach in her eyes.

Nomad, hunter, minstrel, witch's servant — he had taken up all his roles again. Only one thing was still missing from his life.

Zavia.

He did not know precisely when he had lost her. Perhaps it had happened when he returned, wounded by the bear, and Kata claimed him. Or perhaps he had been losing her steadily since the journey to the Great Waste. Looking back, he thought he could see a thousand signs of her discontent. And one day, while he was seeking deer in the south, she took

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another man into her tent — one older than he, a good hunter and amiable, if a trifle dull. A man her mother would never want as acolyte.

For some time, Alaric tried to avoid Zavia, and that was hardly difficult, for she was avoiding him. Days slipped by, then more days. And when at last he tried to speak to her, she strode away, as if he were nothing more than an insect creaking in the night.

He watched her closely after that, though he told himself he was resisting the impulse. He watched her as she walked or rode beside her hunter in the mornings, as she bade him farewell in the afternoons or greeted him in the deep blue evenings. He watched with special care in the evenings, when she linked arms with her new lover and, smiling, led him to her tent. He looked for some sign of a performance in her manner. Every smile, every gesture, every tilt of her head was so familiar to him, yet strange and brittle now, seen from a distance, like a puppet show grown stale from many viewings. But if a puppet show, it was a deft one. Seeing her favors lavished on someone else night after night left Alaric with a hollow feeling in his chest, a deep void like a well gone dry. And sometimes, when he saw the tent flap closing behind them, a painful tightness clawed at his throat.

He caught Zavia alone at last, one afternoon when he finished his own hunting early and her new mate was still out on the snow-covered plain. He stopped her about to enter her tent, and he took her by the arm to keep her from turning away.

"Zavia," he said softly. "Let me speak with you."

She shook off his grip. "We have nothing to say to each other." She reached for the entry flap, but he moved quickly to bar her way.

"Zavia. . . ."

She looked straight into his eyes then, and her lovely mouth pursed tight. "What is it?" she said, and something both desperate and angry simmered in that simple phrase.

At the sharpness in her voice, he hesitated. A confusion of half-formed thoughts surged through him. "I don't know how to say this. I don't even know what I should say."

"Say nothing, then," she advised.

He shook his head and plunged on. "I think of you so often — when I hunt, when I sing. When I'm lying in the dark."

"And when you are visiting my mother?"

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He was surprised by her bluntness. "Yes, even then."

Her left hand, holding fast to the rim of the tent, flexed spasmodically. A strange light danced in her eyes, like the glint of polished metal. "Even when you lie with her?"

"Zavia," he said, "you know that doesn't happen."

"Oh? But surely that is the best way for her to pass her skills to you. And of course it's so much simpler than trying to teach her own daughter. And so much more pleasant!"

"She teaches me nothing, Zavia, and we do not lie together."

"And you never have, I suppose? She has never pressed her magic touch upon you, pretty minstrel?"

Alaric felt his innards coil like a trapped snake. This was too complex for him; there was too much at work behind her words — anger, pride, jealousy, all jumbled together. He tried to take her shoulders between his hands, but she twisted away. "Listen to me, Zavia," he said. "I am not your mother's acolyte, and I never will be. She and I agreed on that."

"Liar. I see you go to her tent nearly every day."

"I carry food to her, and I help with her packing, but there is no instruction in magic."

"I hear no truth in your voice. Why should I believe you?"

"Zavia. . . ." But he was stymied. He had no answer, and could only spread his hands, imploring her with a silent look.

"You see," she said, "you have nothing to say." She turned her face away from him. "Your lack of an answer becomes the answer; that is how the truth is finally known."

"You're wrong, Zavia," he said. He almost raised a hand to touch her cheek. But instead, he said, "I love you, Zavia." Even to his own ears, the words seemed an afterthought.

"Love!" she cried, her voice strained, crackling like ice dropped into warm water. "So much is excused for love, in the name of love!" Her body swayed, and the tent frame quivered in response. She gave him a long, hard look. "You claim not to be her acolyte, but those are only words. I will know it is true when she calls *me* to her tent for lessons. Now let me pass." She shoved him aside with one forearm and ducked into the tent.

He pulled open the leather flap and stood in the entrance. "You misjudge me, Zavia. Your mother's magic means nothing to me. But you mean a great deal."

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She bent and scooped up her oil lamp; its tiny flame fluttered wildly in the breeze that soughed past Alaric's body. "You and I are finished, minstrel. I've found myself another keen hunter. Now go away." And she waved the lamp so close to his face that he had to step back or be singed.

"Zavia. . . ."

"Go! Leave me!" She wrenched the flap from his hand, and it fell like a curtain between them.

He stood there, staring at the dark, finely creased surface of the hide. Of course, he could lift it aside again, but he understood how useless that would be. A wall more substantial than mere leather stood between them.

He thought about Kata then, who had never intended to teach her daughter anything. All of Zavia's claims on Kata's wisdom and rank were self-delusion. Even if the stranger from the south had never appeared on these rolling plains, the end would have been the same. He could explain that truth to Zavia in some detail; he could show her precisely why all her jealousies and her anger were unfounded. Perhaps he could win her back with that cold bath of reality. Perhaps.

But no, he thought. No. Her bright delusion, her hope, was the core of her being. The truth would ravage her, would beat her to the ground as surely as a cudgel blow. And she wouldn't believe him anyway; or worse, she would half-believe, and that half-belief would gnaw at her like a worm in the heart.

Better by far to watch her from a distance, and never feel the radiance of her smile again, than to cause her so much pain. The leather hanging between them was not simply a wall; it was the sheer face of a cliff, which even his special power could not help him scale.

"They choose for themselves," Simir said to him later that night, when the wind whistled too loud for singing, except as flapping leather sang. "We can argue, we can beg, we can even fight each other for them, but in the end, they do the choosing."

Alaric caressed the polished wood of the lute as he might have caressed Zavia's thigh. He hadn't spoken of it, but the high chief knew of his conversation with Zavia; he supposed the whole band knew by now.

"She's a flighty one," Simir went on. "He won't be the last, not him."

Alaric shrugged.

"But there are other girls as pretty as she, and as lively. Plenty of

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them at the calving grounds every year."

Alaric sighed. "Let be, Simir. Men may die in songs from losing a woman's love, but I will not." He plucked a chord. "She wanted a great deal from me that I could not give. Perhaps I should be surprised only that she stayed so long."

"She's a fool for leaving you," Simir said gruffly.

"No," said Alaric, and he shook his head slowly. "Probably not."

WINTER ON the northern plain stretched on and on, until Alaric began to think that, somehow, the mountains that marked off the nomads' land from the rest of the world were keeping spring away as well. In the south the snow melted, and green buds showed on trees and bushes everywhere; returning north was like stepping out of a dream — the contrast between soft green and bleak whiteness never failed to startle him.

But even in the north, winter eased to a close at last, with the snow melting away at last to reveal the dead, dry grass of the previous year. The deer feasted then, and the nomads feasted as well, for game seemed suddenly to spring from nowhere — young foxes, wild cats, and countless rabbits bursting from their parents' dens to greet the mild weather and fill the hunters' bags. Talk of the coming calves began; the calving grounds were not far away, for during the winter the band had completed its grand circuit of the north, and now it was moving back toward the place where the herds would mingle and the music and dance would last half the night. With the warming of the breeze, everyone was looking forward to the calving.

This spring, though, the herd of Simir's band would be scarcely a quarter of its old size. In spite of Alaric's efforts, the nomads had been forced to eat seven out of eight of all the bucks and yearlings, and nearly half the pregnant does. It would be years, the graybeards said, before the herd recovered. There was talk of rebuilding its numbers by calling in debts from other bands.

At the calving grounds, though, they quickly saw that no one would be paying debts in deer.

Simir's was not the first band to arrive; half a dozen had pitched their tents already, though no one would have guessed it from the scatter of grazing animals. Even when all the people of the north had gathered, the

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combined herd was pitifully small, nothing like the sea of deer that Alaric had marveled at the previous year. There would be no debt-paying; and if the next winter were not mild as milk, there would be no deer afterward.

Simir had no need to call a meeting of the chiefs of every band. They were at his tent, every one, as soon as their people made camp. And anyone else who had no pressing work was there, too, or as close as the milling throng would permit. Alaric slipped away from the tumult early and found a fire where people who had not seen him since the previous spring were willing to share their thin stew in return for a song. In the end, he gave them more than that, singing deep into the night, and thinking, while he sang, how different this gathering was from last year's. It was noisy, true, but the voices were anxious, not joyous, and the dance music seemed strained and desperate rather than jubilant. And the faces that watched him were gaunt and winter-worn, and their smiles were forced.

Yet they were hospitable as ever, and when his hosts saw him yawn and glance toward Simir's tent, where the crowd had hardly thinned though dawn was near, they offered him a soft pallet and fur coverlets. He accepted gratefully, and only as he was drifting to sleep did he realize, faintly, that he had never asked them their names.

In the morning there was a little cold stew for breakfast, and then Alaric sang again. He was still singing when a man with a girl-child riding his shoulders slipped in among the listeners. Alaric did not recognize the child, with her hollow cheeks and deep-set eyes, but he knew who she must be. When the song was done, he stood up and clasped her father's hand.

"Fowsh," he said.

"I've thought of you more than once, minstrel," Fowsh told him. "And wondered if you'd survive this hard winter with us. My mother thought not, but I see she was wrong."

Alaric smiled a little. "Tell your mother it wasn't all my own doing; I had plenty of help."

"My mother is dead," Fowsh said. "And so is my father."

"Ah, Fowsh, no."

"Just before Midwinter they walked away from our camp together. They never came back." He glanced up at his daughter, then squeezed her thin leg. "They thought it would help us."

Alaric gripped his arm. "Was it so bad even in the south?"

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"There was no game," said Fowsh. "Now we have no deer."

"None at all?"

"We slaughtered the last doe today. There was no point in keeping her."

"But what will you do now? Next year?"

"Join another band, perhaps. Or move into the mountains. There's always been food there."

"Raid the Red Lord's valley, you mean."

Fowsh nodded. "If Simir agrees. Nuriki's gone to ask him."

"It's dangerous."

Fowsh squeezed his daughter's leg again. "Starving on the plains is dangerous, too." He gave Alaric the shadow of a smile. "Come, minstrel, share our dinner and sing for our fire this night. We have need of your brightest songs."

"No, Fowsh, I couldn't—"

"There's fresh stew in the pot and eager ears waiting for your songs."

"But it's all you have, Fowsh. I'll sing, and gladly, but Simir can feed me."

"You cannot reject fair payment, minstrel—"

"Please. The high chief still has deer."

Fowsh pressed his lips tight together for a moment. Then he said, "Very well. Let the high chief feed you. But it will not please my wife, I promise you."

It was at Fowsh's fire, late that afternoon, that Alaric heard Simir was looking for him. He had eaten after all, pressed by Fowsh's wife, but only a token amount, and he was hungry. Still, he was sorry to leave, for though he had managed to bring a few smiles to the faces at that fire, they had been feeble ones.

"Tell him how it is with us," Fowsh said as he walked toward Simir's tent with Alaric. "Tell him we need his wisdom now more than ever."

"I will." They stopped within sight of the throng that still surrounded the tent, and Alaric clasped Fowsh's hand. "There will be help for you. I swear it."

Fowsh nodded and let him go on alone.

My first friend in the north, Alaric thought, glancing back once, raising his hand in a last brief wave. *Would you and your family be happy*

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where the snow is not so deep, nor the winter wind so bitter! I know a place. I know a dozen places.

Simir's tent was even more crowded than the space around it. Two-score men and more sat inside, shoulder to shoulder — graybeards, band chieftains, men of experience; Alaric knew some of them from Simir's own circle, and he recognized Nuriki and several others from the previous year. They bent together, in groups of three and four, murmuring, and few of them noticed Alaric. Simir did, though, and gestured for him to stay at the entry. With a few words to his close neighbors, the high chief rose from his place and picked a careful path to Alaric's side.

"You and I must speak," he said. "Come walk with me among the deer."

They elbowed their way past the curious, the anxious, the questioning, and every time Simir's name was called, he shook his head and waved the caller away. When the crowd would have followed them into the fringe of the herd, he stopped it with a sharp gesture.

"They want to know what the future holds," he said at last, when the deer had closed around them and replaced the babble of human voices with their own snufflings.

"Who does not?" said Alaric.

"You would know something if you had been listening to our councils."

Alaric shrugged. "I didn't think your councils needed any of my northern wisdom." He smiled a little. "As well ask one of these deer for advice."

Simir looked back toward his tent. "Advice I have in plenty. Much of it would have seemed foolish last year. Now it merely seems desperate." He shook his head. "There's not a man in that tent who didn't see his children hungry this winter, and feel his own belly gripe. Who hasn't wondered how his family — and his whole band — will survive next year." He turned to Alaric then. "We were the lucky ones. We had a larger herd and more hunters than most, even for our size. And we had you."

"I've heard," Alaric replied softly, "that some bands have lost all their deer."

Simir nodded. "Kata says next winter will be better, but it's too late for that. As a people, we've lost too much at this point, and there is no way to recover. No way as we are. So we must change. We must settle in one place and be farmers and shepherds, if we can."

Alaric stared at him. "That's a change indeed. What do the nomads of the north know of farming and sheep?"

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"Most of them, nothing. But they can learn."

"Well, I know little enough about planting, but isn't it late in the season to begin? Even if you had grain and plows?"

"We'd be fools to plant here," said Simir. "The soil is thin and poorly watered, and the north wind blows cold too often in summer. No, we must go elsewhere. And there is one place where the grain is in the ground already and the harvest is sure, where the sheep are fat, and their wool is heavy. We have all agreed on it — the Red Lord's valley."

"The Red Lord's—"

"We have five hundred warriors eager to take his castle. To make his valley ours forever."

Alaric curled a hand about the neck of his lute; its back-bent pegbox stood close beside his ear, like a friend trying to whisper good advice. He remembered the Red Lord's castle. "It's a strong fortification," he said.

"No one knows that better than I. But we have no choice."

"No," Alaric said firmly, "there is a choice. Let me carry you south. The forest is large enough to shelter all of you, and you can clear fields and plant grain there if you want. Or you can hunt. The hunting is fine, truly, once you're accustomed to it; you'd have a new life, and no need to fight the Red Lord."

"You would carry every one of us, would you? All our hundreds, and our goods?"

"It would take time. And I could manage only the lighter deer. But it would be so much better—"

"No." Just the one word, but it cut Alaric off firmly. The two of them stood for a moment looking at each other. Then Simir said, "The plan is that six of us go inside, disguised as pilgrims, and kill the Red Lord. The rest will have their best chance in the confusion that follows. Without its commander, his army will flounder."

Alaric's fingers tightened on his lute. "Simir, this is madness. You'll be killed."

"What must be done, must be done."

"Can you even be sure of killing him? The man has guards, and he's no fool to let armed men inside his walls."

"We'll use our bare hands if necessary. But it might be easier . . . if you decided to help us."

Alaric felt his heart shrink within him. "Simir. . . ."

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"You could kill him yourself and escape without a scratch. It should be simple enough for the man who defeated Berown and bedeviled three strong young men."

The minstrel shook his head. "No, no, it isn't simple at all. I don't know the keep except for a few public rooms, and the tower where he tortures his victims. All guarded places; not private, like a bedroom or a bath. To kill him where guards are near would be to invite my own death. And I'm not as eager for that as you are for yours, Simir."

"But you're quick. No one would catch you. They would be too startled."

"Some people react with great speed when startled. They don't waste time in thinking."

Simir caught him by the shoulders. "You once said you *could* do it."

Alaric looked at him steadily. "I also said I was afraid. Neither of those has changed."

Simir shook him a little, his big hands hard as manacles. "*You* have changed." The high chief's eyes seemed to be searching his. "Do you know yourself at all, Alaric? You've fought both a madman and a bear; you've trekked across the Great Waste; you've given all your strength to help the people of the north. You once said that your way was to run from danger. But you've stopped running! And you think you haven't changed?" He gripped Alaric's shoulders even tighter. "If you help us, we'll succeed; I know it."

"And if I say no?"

"I go anyway. And I think that you and I will not meet again."

Alaric half-turned away from him. "These are black choices, Simir."

"Black choices indeed, my son. Life and death."

Alaric shook his head. "Death however you look at it. One way or another, you'll water the valley grain with blood."

"I'd water it from my own veins if I thought it would save my people."

In a low voice, Alaric said, "The valley peasants were your people once."

Simir stood silent for a long moment. His mouth was firm, his eyes unwavering. "Do you pity them?" he said at last.

"I pity the ones who will die."

"They serve him. If the travelers who died in the valley could speak, they would say there is no one innocent there."

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Alaric looked at him sadly. "You served him. If you die, shall I not pity you?"

He caught hold of the minstrel's shoulder once more. "If the people of the north die next winter, will you have enough pity for all of them?"

"Simir, Simir, is there no other way?"

"We can't beg them to take us in. You know that."

Alaric closed his eyes and felt the high chief's hand heavy on his shoulder, so much heavier than the lute. "A black, black course, Simir," he said in a whisper that was nearly a hiss.

"Our chosen course. Do you follow it with us . . . or not?" Simir's voice was not harsh, but his face looked like a carven stone.

Alaric curled his hand around Simir's thick wrist. "Father. . . ."

"Are you of the north, my son, or not?"

He barely heard his own voice say, "I'll go."

Simir embraced him then, and the lute twanged as his big arm brushed its strings. Those strings were speaking, Alaric knew, giving the good advice of an old friend, but he could not hear the words. Instead, his ears were filled with Simir's voice, and a different kind of music. "You are my true son, Alaric. Now come back to the tent, for we have plans to make."

The plans, Alaric realized, had largely been made already. Most of the men in Simir's tent had been to the valley as youths, and they remembered all the mountain pathways and all the natural landmarks. Simir himself had drawn a map on deerhide to show the routes he intended, the movements, the points of assault on the castle. So certain were they all, that Alaric knew the scheme had not been hatched in a day or two, but had been germinating for years.

The young, the old, the weak, the women and children would stay behind. The rest — every man strong enough to swing a sword or bend a bow — would be part of the attack. They would creep into the valley by night, bypass all the peasant holdings that once they would have plundered, and gather about the Red Lord's fortification. Simir and his picked company would go inside, dressed as pilgrims from the south; they even had woolen clothing, laid away for years against this day, to make the ruse plausible.

"We may be given supper and commanded to entertain the Red Lord with tales of our wanderings," the high chief told his party. "Or we may

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be thrown into prison as soon as we arrive. It is even possible that one or two of us may be taken to the tower for immediate torture. But no prison, not even the tower, can hold us while Alaric is with us."

"Can he carry even you, Simir?" someone asked.

Alaric smiled grimly. "Not easily, perhaps. But easily enough. I'm more concerned that someone will recognize me."

"That won't happen," said Simir. "Not after Kata is finished with you."

"No one would know him now, not even a lover," Kata said scrutinizing her handiwork. She had shaved Alaric's head, even his eyebrows, and applied a stain to darken his skin. "Leave the lute behind, and they'll never guess they've seen you before."

"I'll take the lute," Alaric replied. "We may need music on this journey. But I won't carry it into the castle."

"You'll stain your whole body, of course, when the time comes."

He nodded.

"And the rest of us will do the same," said Simir. "So that we'll all seem of a kind."

"Yes," said Kata. She passed him two flasks of the staining powder. "Remember to make the solution thin, so that the color will be even."

"I'll remember."

"I would that I could go with you, to be sure it was done properly. And the shaving, too; it isn't easy to shave a head."

Simir sighed.

"You'll need me, Simir. The fallen will need me."

He shook his head. "No, the decision has been made, and we must stand by it. Who falls, falls. We must not risk you; those who stay behind will need you all the more if we fail."

She looked into his eyes. "I doubt that I will be enough for them, should you fail."

"The decision has been made," he said firmly, and he turned his back on her and strode from the tent.

"He is tired," Alaric said softly.

"I know," said Kata. "Now listen to me, my Alaric." She curled her hand around his wrist. "You must look after him. He hates the Red Lord with a passion that you and I cannot understand."

Alaric pursed his lips. "I think I can understand it."

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"I doubt that. For all the years he has been with us, he has never forgotten what the Red Lord did to him. First love is powerful, my Alaric. That much, you *do* know."

He nodded.

"Don't let him be foolish, my Alaric. The north needs him."

"I'll do my best."

"He depends on you. You are all he has now. The boys, Marak and Terevli, were killed this winter, trying to steal deer from one of the southern bands. Now he can never call them back."

"Kata," he whispered, catching at her other hand, holding it tight. "I can't be all he wants me to be."

"But you must, Alaric. You must."

THE WARRIORS chose the strongest of the deer to carry them south, and others to feed them on the journey. The rest were left with the women and children to be divided up for some semblance of the nomads' usual circuit of the plains. The farewells were quiet, Alaric thought, chillingly quiet, and as he rode with Simir at the head of the northern host, he could not help wondering how many of the women who watched their husbands leave this day did not expect ever to see them again.

Simir drove his army hard, but Alaric heard no complaints save from his own heart. For him the days flew by too swiftly, and the nights seemed short as on the northern ice. He sang in the evenings, while fresh venison roasted over a score of campfires, and the men crowded to listen, but the songs seemed empty to his own ears. He could think of nothing but the journey's end — while he rode, as he sang, while he lay bundled in furs watching the stars wheel toward dawn. He stared at the blank white face of the moon one night, long after its rising, as it floated in the darkness above him like a silver penny. He knew a dozen legends about it; some said it was a ball made of ice, some that it was the mirror of a goddess and had once borne her name, Selena. But a more ominous legend lingered with him after it passed from his view — that the bright moon was the silver shield of an ancient war god, set in the sky as a reminder to men of death in combat.

He dreaded the end of the journey, and his dread sifted like powdered snow through his veins, chilling him more than the night air, more even

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than the black waters beneath the northern ice. But he said nothing, not to Simir, not to anyone else, because he knew that no one would listen.

The mountain passes were clear by the time the nomad army reached them — not a trace of snow remained. The barren rocks that Alaric remembered were everywhere cloaked in the green of tufted grasses and hardy bushes, and the sweet, fresh scent of growing things wafted gently on the breeze. The deer, surefooted as goats on the dry soil, had little trouble picking their way among heights, and their progress was steady, if slow.

Simir called a halt when they were less than half a day from their goal, and while the nomad army rested, he took a party of three forward to scout the valley. In case those left behind needed to be warned quickly of some danger, Alaric was one of the three.

At dusk the Red Lord's domain seemed quiet enough. High on a bushy mountainside, Simir and his companions could see the whole extent of the valley — the small lake bordered by fields of new grain; the peasant cottages scattered among those fields; the slow river, gleaming in the reddish light like molten gold; and the castle, many-turreted, its massive keep rising higher than the battlements. Among the cottages, they could barely see tiny figures moving homeward with their goats and sheep.

"All peaceful," Simir murmured.

Alaric felt the dread rise within him, stronger than ever.

It was late afternoon, three days later, that all the nomad army was in place, ranged above the valley behind boulders and bushes, ready to move downward at full dark. The deer had been left behind, to keep them from giving their masters away with occasional bawling, and the men themselves were silent as the grass that cushioned their bodies. At the barest beginning of twilight, seven pilgrims, their heads all freshly shaven, their skins darkened by Kata's stain, moved down an easy slope on the southern wall of the valley. They made no attempt to avoid the nearest cottage, nor to silence its goats, penned nearby and disturbed by their presence. A cotter peered out of his window and asked them who they were, strangers traveling so late in the Red Lord's valley. Simir offered their story of pilgrimage, their intention to ask for hospitality in the castle, and the man nodded and said no more. When they were well past his home, though,

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they saw a child running in a field not far off — running parallel to their course, but passing them quickly — and Simir murmured that it was surely the cotter's child, sent to report the strangers to the castle.

Certainly, by the time they arrived, the Red Lord's men were not surprised to see them. It was nearly full dark by then, and torches were blazing to either side of the open portcullis. In that flaring light, a dozen soldiers in chain skirts and dark leather waited, their hands resting casually on the hilts of their sheathed swords.

One of them stepped forward. "Pilgrim's bound *where?*" he said.

Alaric recognized the man from the previous year, and fought an impulse to turn his face away. *No one would know him now,* Kata had said, and he clenched his teeth, hoping it was true.

"They say there's a shrine to the Pole Star in the north," Simir said easily. "Where the land of ice begins."

The soldier eyed them. "That might be a very long walk."

"We are not afraid of walking."

"There are bandits along the way."

"We have nothing to steal," said Simir.

The soldiers smiled just a trifle. "And you won't find any castles beyond here, to give you a night's hospitality."

Simir bowed to him. "All the more reason to seek it here."

The man nodded. "Then come inside for a meal and a decent bed. You must be weary of sleeping out in the mountains."

Simir bowed again, and all twelve guards stepped aside to let him and his companions through the gate. Then they formed up into an escort for the group, with the one who had spoken leading the way.

The torchlight courtyard was as Alaric remembered it — the low barracks on one side, a few sentries at scattered posts, and many more unarmed idlers taking their ease everywhere. The central hall of the keep was the same as well, with its ancient faded tapestries, its fine furniture rubbed smooth by the touch of many bodies, its flagstone floor worn in a path to the Red Lord's chair by the tread of generations. Nothing had changed, nothing.

Except the Red Lord himself.

Just the year before, he had sat straight and tall in that chair, and his eyes had been gray and cold as the winter sky, his voice commanding as a drum. But no longer. Now the great Red Lord slumped in his seat, as if

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the weight of his crimson clothing, or of his own gaunt body, were too much for him to bear. Now his eyes were rheumy, and his voice issued from a throat grown corded and thin, a voice that quavered with every word.

"Pilgrims," he muttered, as if unsure of the meaning of the word. "Is there truly a shrine in the north? I do not recall it."

They had knelt with their escort some half a dozen paces from the chair, and he had not given them leave to rise. On his knees, Simir said, "My lord, we have been told it is a very holy place."

"I've heard of holy places in the south. But the north . . . the north, you say?"

"Not far beyond the mountains, my lord, so we were told."

"Beyond the mountains?" In a peevish tone, he added, "Where is he? He knows the north. Has no one called him? You laggards, call him now! We know how to punish laziness! Where *is* he?"

"Here, Lord," a voice called from behind the nomads.

Alaric felt his whole body stiffen. He knew that voice. He heard steps coming near, hard boots on the flagstone, and saw the quivering, torch-spawned shadow fall across Simir's body.

"Hello, Father," said Gilo.

He was gaunter now, strong new hollows showing in his cheeks, but the old familiar arrogance lingered in his eyes. He wore the tunic of the Red Lord's own crimson above his dark leather trews; he was the only other man in the room who wore that color, and he carried himself as if it meant a great deal.

"Pilgrims," he said, and he smiled a hard, cold smile. "My lord, you know well what that betokens." His eyes flicked to the leader of the soldiers. "Seize them."

At once the soldiers sprang to their feet, swords gliding from their scabbards. Seven of them took a nomad each by one elbow, and dragged him upright. From the stone stairway at the far end of the room, half a dozen more men stepped forward, pikes at the ready, to form another circle about the prisoners.

Gilo crossed his arms over his broad chest. "You shouldn't have waited, Father. You weren't going to get any closer to him than you are now. You see, he doesn't let travelers kiss his ring anymore, not since I told him about your plan."

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"These are the proper pilgrims, then?" the Red Lord said in his quavering, cracking voice.

"Oh, very proper, my lord," said Gilo. He scanned the dark-stained faces. At Alaric's he paused, and then his mouth twisted into a sneer. "I see you brought the best help you could find." He stepped closer and took hold of the minstrel's tunic at the throat. "I have a debt to pay to you, my brother."

Alaric looked into his eyes and saw the hate there, dancing like reflected torchlight. "Have you?" he whispered. "It seems to me you've come out of it all well enough."

With a jerk of his powerful arm, Gilo threw him to the floor. "Yes," he said, and his teeth showed for a moment, like a snarling animal's. "And you will be the first to see just how well." He looked up to the Red Lord. "This one to the tower," he said.

Of course, thought Alaric; *he doesn't know about me.*

The old man rose from his chair, his legs unsteady beneath him. With one hand, he gripped an armrest, and with the other, which shook like a storm-blown leaf, he touched his neck where the pale scar showed above his collar. The scar that Simir's knife had given him. "No," he said, his voice suddenly strong, as if all the force of his body were being focused in it. "Your father and I have an older debt between us."

Gilo's mouth tightened for an instant, and then he stepped back, away from the prisoners. "As you will, my lord." He gestured sharply to the soldiers. "Take the big one to the tower."

Three guards prodded Simir toward the stairway.

The Red Lord eased back into his seat, his breathing heavy. "I'll go to the tower as well," he said weakly.

"My lord . . . ," Gilo began.

"It will give me strength." He made a sign with one hand, and the two largest pikemen went to him and slid their pikes through slots beneath the seat of his chair; standing one before and one behind him, they gently hoisted the sedan they had created. As they started toward the stairway, he made another gesture and said, in a voice barely audible, "Take the rest to the cells for now." He did not look back to see that the remaining soldiers glanced at Gilo for a confirming nod before they moved to obey.

When the iron-banded door had shut behind them, the prisoners hud-

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dled together in the farthest corner of their cell. Their only light came through a small, barred window to the corridor outside, scarcely enough to show the dimensions of the chamber. Shoulder to shoulder, with their cloaks drawn about them, the nomads resembled nothing so much as a huge pile of dirty laundry. No one glancing through that window could have guessed that where there had been six men huddled, now there were only five.

The weapons they had left behind lay wrapped in leather on the night-dark mountainside. Alaric scooped up the waiting bundle, and, a moment later, spread it before his companions, exposing swords, bows, and quivers packed tight with arrows. When the others were all armed, he strapped his own blade to his waist, and Simir's beside it, and then he vanished once more.

He had guessed that enough time had passed for even the Red Lord's sedan chair to reach the tower. At its summit, he recalled, was a ring of four wedged-shaped rooms, each accessible only from its immediate neighbors — individual storerooms, for silver, gold, jewels, and ravaged human flesh. He appeared in the silver chamber, ready to leave instantly if anyone were there. It was empty, save for its many chests of silver, but the sound of human voices, and the rustle of metal against metal, told him that people were near. And one was in shackles.

He pressed himself to the nearest wall and edged quietly to the open door of the gold storeroom. Peering in, he saw no one and flitted inside. The next door, which also stood open, led to the jewel room; it, too, was unoccupied; but standing in the doorway that led to the final chamber was a man-at-arms. He was a pikeman, his weapon tipped back against his shoulder, its point barely clearing the lintel. His back was to Alaric. From beyond him came Simir's voice, proud and challenging. Alaric could not make out the words, and did not stay to try.

In the cell, the men were ready. One after the other, they threw off their cloaks, and then Alaric carried each of them to the gold room, scarcely pausing for breath between trips. When all were in place, ranged on either side of the farther door, they looked to him: five pairs of eyes, five swords, awaiting his signal.

He set his teeth together and gave the nod.

They burst through the doorway, the last man heaving the door shut and throwing the heavy inside bolt; by then the first of them had stabbed

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the pikeman through the back and charged ahead. Alaric took in the scene forming beyond the last doorway — the falling man, and past him the startled guards, just turning toward their attackers; the Red Lord, his whole attention still focused on his captive; and Simir, chained to the far wall, every line of his body shouting defiance. In the next instance, Alaric was beside Simir, grasping the high chief about the thighs, lifting with all the strength he could muster, moving them both out, away.

They appeared just beyond the locked door, in the gold room, and Alaric staggered as he let his burden drop. One glance told him that Simir was whole; even the shackles had come with him, as well as a large chunk of the stone to which they were bolted. Alaric grasped a wrist cuff in each hand, moved a pace away in his own fashion, and the high chief's arms were finally free.

As Simir slid his sword from Alaric's belt, the door made a soft noise, and the high chief leaped to one side, motioning sharply for Alaric to do the same. The heavy panel opened just wide enough for a pike-head to slip through, like some strange iron viper giving challenge. Simir's hand shot out and grabbed the shank as he lunged against the door, forcing it inward.

Alaric had raised his blade like an ax, both hands on the hilt. His palms were clammy, and the sweat poured down his face and neck and spine like a freezing rain. As Simir pushed into the jewel room, Alaric braced himself to meet anyone who might rush past the high chief's bulky frame.

But the men beyond the door were nomads.

Only the Red Lord was alive in the final chamber — alive and still seated in his chair, with a dazed look on his face and a gag torn from his own red tunic sealing his mouth. Four of his men lay crumpled at his feet, their blood smeared across the stone floor. The other — the first pikeman — was sprawled like a shadow at the threshold; one of the nomads kicked his feet aside as they all stepped back into the torture room.

Simir stood before the master of his youth, and as he looked down into that gaunt, pale face, there was contempt in the set of the nomad chief's mouth. "It's good that you know me," he said, and with a single thrust of his blade, he pierced the Red Lord to the heart. "I wish there had been time to give you a taste of what you gave so many others," he added, wrenching the blade free, "but we must not be fools." He signed to the others to follow as he started toward the door.

They were just entering the gold room, Alaric only a step behind

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Simir, when they saw Gilo through the opposite doorway. And he saw them.

He was alone, and he came to a halt as if striking some invisible barrier, his face betraying his astonishment. Then he turned abruptly and ran, shouting an alarm. Simir started after him, the others at his heels, but Gilo reached the door to the silver room, pulled the massive panel closed behind him, and turned the key before they could get there.

"Alaric!" said Simir. "Stop him!"

Alaric took a deep breath and leaped to the other side of the door. Gilo was already bounding down the stairs, still crying for help. *Stop him,* Alaric thought, and abruptly he was on the stairway, and Gilo was crashing into him. The impact bowled them over, and they fell a dozen steps, clutching each other.

They came to rest on a narrow landing, Gilo on the bottom, his back to the cold stone. He caught Alaric's wrists, one in each hand, his grip tighter than any rawhide. His face and lips were bloodless, and all the arrogance was gone from his eyes, replaced by terror. "What *are* you?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Don't you know Gilo?" Alaric said softly. He glanced down the stairway; he could hear soldiers coming, their chain skirts jingling. He hooked a leg behind one of Gilo's knees.

"Wait," Gilo said, his voice breaking. "Let me go. I'll leave now. You'll have the castle, the treasure. I'll never bother you again. I swear it!"

Alaric looked hard into those wide eyes, once so full of malice. "Too late, my brother. Much too late." And with those words, he saw the old Gilo slide back into those eyes.

Suddenly, Gilo twisted, releasing his grip on Alaric's left wrist, and scrabbled for the knife sheathed at his waist. Alaric knocked his hand away from the blade and, before he could try again, swept the two of them up to the silver room. They dropped a hand-height, landing with a thump on the stone floor. Gilo froze, and Alaric used that instant of astonishment to ram a knee into his groin and roll free.

A moment later the nomads were crowding close, their swords making a palisade about the high chief's eldest son as he lay curled on the floor, gasping. Simir himself stood by Gilo's head. He glanced at Alaric, just a flick of the eyes. "Never hesitate," he said, and he thrust his blade through Gilo's throat.

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Gilo made a gurgling sound, as blood frothed and spewed from the wound. Then he lay still.

"Where's your sword?" Simir said to Alaric.

The minstrel tore his eyes from Gilo's body. "I must have lost it on the stairs."

They could hear the thumping of dozens of boots on the steps now, a thumping muffled by the heavy door. Simir strode to the door and threw the bolt. "They'll waste plenty of time trying to open that." He pointed toward the torture chamber with his blade. "Get yourself a weapon, and let's go elsewhere."

Alaric took a sword from one of the bodies. Its hilt was bloody, but he wiped it on his tunic. Then he wiped his own hands as well, though they seemed just as slick afterward.

"The courtyard," Simir said to him. "Find us a shadowed place."

Alaric nodded and was gone.

He appeared beside the barracks, where overhanging eaves made a pool of darkness in the torchlit yard. Immediately, he stepped deeper into that shadow. Before him, in the open space between keep and castle wall, the men who had been idling not long ago were beginning to cluster and to murmur inquiringly among themselves. Word of some disturbance in the keep had reached them, but no one seemed to know what it was. A few of them drifted toward the keep's main entrance, while others were moving uncertainly toward the barracks, where their weapons were stored.

Alaric returned to the tower. "Thirty or forty men in the yard, but most still unarmed. I've found a good spot, though I doubt it will stay so for long."

Simir nodded. "Take me first."

When all of them were there, shadows among shadows, Simir pointed to the sentries at the winches for portcullis and drawbridge; they were no more than two dozen paces away. Then he gave the signal.

Six nomad arrows took down the winch guards, while a seventh, Alaric's, its oil-soaked, cloth-bound tip lighted at the nearest torch, was shot straight into the sky. As the flaming arrow reached its zenith, a wild howling commenced in the darkness beyond the castle walls — nomad warriors rushing to the fray. Simir's party slipped from the shadows to encircle the winches, and though there were shouts from the ramparts concerning the bridge and the portcullis, no one seemed to notice that the

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men who might have done something about them were lying in the dust. Only when the first company of northerners sprinted across the bridge, wooden shields held above the heads against a rain of arrows, did the defenders' attention turn to the courtyard. As those first invaders fought their way through the gate, the Red Lord's men ran to engage them from their posts at the base of the wall and the doorway of the keep, and those newly armed flooded from the barracks.

Alaric moved through the chaos like a ghost, dodging and feinting in his own special way. He never struck a mortal blow, but still he was worth a dozen men to the nomad side, in startlement, confusion, and distraction. Twice he slammed the barracks door on men about to dash out with drawn blades. Then he caught up a fallen pike and swung it wide at ankle height as he flitted from place to place across the yard, tripping soldier after soldier. By the time he lost the pike in the melee of scrambling feet and falling bodies, he had lost his new sword as well. He pulled another from a mail-shirted corpse, but his hands were now too slippery with sweat to hold it fast; a soldier, turning suddenly, struck the sword a powerful blow near the hilt and knocked it spinning. Alaric leaped away, his whole arm burning from the impact.

He flattened himself against the shadowed barracks wall, his breath coming hard and fast, the pain pulsing from wrist to elbow. The confusion of the courtyard seemed to waver and blur before his eyes. Bitter bile rose in his throat, and he fought it down. He knew he mustn't stay long in one place, and with an effort, he focused his eyes on a shadow on the opposite side of the yard and moved to it. He was farther from the fighting there, and he leaned against the cold stone of the castle wall, shaking his head to clear it. He rubbed sweat from his forehead with the back of his left arm and squinted toward the winches. He could just make out Simir, who was taller than most of his opponents.

Then he heard an odd sound, as of a heavy weight falling from a great height.

The portcullis had slammed down.

But we have the winches, Alaric thought, and then he saw that at the top of the wall, where the thick cable should have passed over a last wheel before attaching to the portcullis, there was no cable. It lay instead on the flagstones, where men surged back and forth across it in their struggles. Someone had cut it.

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Perhaps a hundred nomads were trapped inside the castle, and though four hundred others still howled beyond the walls, there was little they could do to help.

Alaric glanced at Simir again and felt the heart shrink in his breast. He felt sick and dizzy, and every instinct screamed at him to get away. Then he scanned the courtyard one last time and willed himself . . .

. . . to the portcullis.

Four men had been crushed by its fall; he appeared standing on their bodies, and he caught at the massive iron grate with his good hand to keep from slipping. Men were fighting on the other side — the Red Lord's soldiers with their backs to him, hard pressed by the nomads. As he stood there, one man was hacked through, and the blade glanced off one of the iron crossbars after cleaving his body.

Alaric embraced the portcullis with his whole body, pressing himself to it, feeling its cold strength, its immobility, through his clothing and against his naked cheek. He embraced it and called up all his own strength, and he willed himself to move.

He felt himself falling in darkness — no, not falling, but being *pulled*, and he thrust the weight of metal away from him, or thrust himself from it, he was not sure which. He fell anyway, and slammed his injured arm on something hard, and cried out with the sudden rush of pain. Then he lay still and began to sob, the helpless tears flooding from him, half physical hurt, half anguish of his heart. The portcullis was beneath him, a hard bed on the grassy mountainside. The night was dark, and the shouts from the Red Lord's castle were the merest breath on the summer wind.

Alaric lay limp on the cold metal, weeping and alone.

IT WAS morning when he limped across the drawbridge. The portcullis was still down, what was left of it — broken bars on either side, leaving room for five men abreast to pass through. A dozen nomads were guarding the opening. They greeted him wearily, but he said nothing to them, only walked on.

The courtyard was a charnel house, corpses everywhere, blood everywhere. Two men came out of the keep as he entered; they carried another corpse between them. He didn't look to see if it was Gilo, or perhaps the Red Lord, or even someone who had ridden beside him across the snowy plain. He walked on.

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Simir and some others stood talking where the Red Lord's chair had been. They saw the minstrel when he entered the room.

"Alaric!" Simir cried, striding toward him. "We've been looking for you half the night! You're hurt!"

Alaric cradled his right arm with his left, as if it were a baby. Swathed in cloth — in his own cloak, retrieved from the dungeon — it made a large bundle. "My arm is wrenched. The rest are just bruises."

Simir circled the minstrel's shoulders with his own big arm. "Come into the kitchen. Have something hot to eat, and we can look at it."

In the kitchen, tables and stools had been pushed aside to make room for the nomad wounded. These lay on straw pallets, covered with blankets or cloaks, or with tapestries ripped from the walls, and they were tended by nearly as many of their uninjured fellows. At the great hearth the Red Lord's cooks bent over half a dozen simmering caldrons, and ladled the Red Lord's food onto trenchers for his conquerors. The old woman who served Alaric was dull-eyed, her movements slow and stiff. He wondered if she had seen the carnage in the yard. He wondered if perhaps her own son was there, or her grandson.

Simir unwrapped Alaric's arm, and several chunks of ice fell free of the swaddling cloth.

"Where did you get ice at this time of year—?" he began, and then he nodded. "Of course."

The arm was swollen from knuckles to elbow. Simir probed the joint, then moved the fingers and the wrist itself. "A bad sprain," he said at last, wrapping it up with the ice again and fashioning a sling from a fragment of drapery. "You won't be playing the lute for a time. But perhaps we can make it a short one — we've found the Red Lord's private store of wine, and steeping in the bottom of each barrel, a bag of dried leaves that smell of the valley's Elixir plants. It won't be one of Kata's potions, but it's better than none at all. A better remedy for this, I venture, than it ever was for an aching heart."

"I don't want the Red Lord's wine."

"I think Kata would want you to drink it."

Alaric looked away from his and shook his head. "What Kata would want no longer matters. I won't be seeing her again."

Simir gripped his good shoulder suddenly. "Why do you say that? Has something happened to her while we've been gone?"

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"No. Not to her; to me."

"To you . . . ?"

Alaric turned his face to Simir's. The high chief was exhausted; that, he could see. And there was a shallow cut on his cheek, a line of beaded clots and a faint smear of red. "I'm not staying, Simir," said the minstrel. "I'm going back to the south."

Simir's grip loosened; then, stiffly, he rubbed Alaric's shoulder. "You're tired, my son. You need rest. We all do."

Alaric looked into the high chief's weary eyes and saw everything the north had been to him. He saw Zavia and Kata, and Grem and Fowsh. He saw Gilo and Berown. And above all, he saw Simir himself, and those nights of song and laughter at his fire. "You've been very kind to me. I won't forget you."

"Alaric, don't be foolish. This is the beginning of our new life. You can't leave now. Why, Kata wants to teach you all her lore, and Zavia — I wager she'll take you back. She's already tired of that other one, and you will be her hero, as you will be to all our people."

"Will I?" *As if that matters.*

"We took this castle because of you; you know that."

He closed his eyes. "I didn't kill anyone last night. Not a single man. And yet all their deaths are on my head. Every one."

"And through their deaths, we live." Simir's voice softened. "It's a hard world, my son. Only the strong and the clever survive. Surely you've learned that in your wanderings." He hesitated. "It is something a high chief must never forget, for his people's sake."

Alaric looked into his face again then. "That's what you would have me be, isn't it? The high chief after you."

Simir smiled a little. "You'd make a fine one."

"Simir, you don't know me."

"Oh, I think I do, my son."

"No. You know what you wish me to be. But what I am inside" — he tapped his chest with his good hand — "you don't know that. If you did, you'd understand why I must go." He gripped Simir's arm. "I have loved you all, Simir; never doubt that. Especially you."

Simir's smile faded slowly as his red-rimmed eyes searched Alaric's. "You're all that I have left, Alaric," he said softly.

The minstrel gave him look for look. "I'm sorry," he answered gently.

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"Stay at least till your arm heals."

Alaric shook his head.

Simir mouth tightened for a moment, then worked once, twice, as if he were about to say something, but stopped himself. At last he did say, "What shall I tell the others?"

"That the minstrel has traveled on, as minstrels do."

"And Kata? She had such high hopes for you."

"I think . . . Kata knows already."

Simir looked at his swaddled arm. "Where will you go, Alaric? How will you earn your meat? You can't play. . . ."

"There are people who will remember my songs and give their hospitality for that memory's sake. I'll manage." He took a step back from the high chief, slowly shedding his touch. "Farewell, Simir."

"What, now, this very moment? But you're far too tired to travel, surely."

"Not in my way."

Simir's mouth curved, but the expression was joyless, nothing like a smile this time. "You're very stubborn, minstrel," he whispered. "It is a northern trait, gift of the Pole Star. Perhaps it means the Pole Star will look after you, even in the south. You are one of us, after all. You always will be."

Alaric felt the sadness deepen inside him. "No," he said softly. "I never was. But thank you for thinking it. Father."

A heartbeat later he was on the mountainside where he had left his lute, and then he was in the southern forest, in a bower he had used in former times. Feeling drained of life, he lay down upon the thick cushion of last year's leaves, the lute held fast in the crook of his good arm. But sleep was slow in coming, because his injured arm throbbed, and because the future seemed so bleak. The southern sun was warm, and it helped him to rest; but in his heart, Alaric felt the winter of exile closing about him again.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE SLAVE OF THE LAMP

MY PERIODONTIST is a wise guy. No doubt he thinks I am one, too, but he has an advantage over me. Four times a year, he pokes around my gums with sharp instruments of torture and makes comments about their condition which verge on personal insult.

Naturally, I try to hand it back, but since he usually arranges to have my mouth full of blood, my natural ebullience is dampened.

Last week, though, I got him.

He said to me, "Your gums are in pretty good condition. What have you done? Changed your lifestyle?"

I said, gravely, "I attribute it to excellent periodontal care, Joel."

Whereupon Joel, smiling fatuously, said, "All right. I'll accept that."

To which I replied, "And then, of course, I sometimes come here."

All his muttering, jabbing, and general butchery couldn't keep me from grinning for the rest of the session.

So while I'm still in good humor, I'll continue the discussion of fuels that I began last month.

Last month, I talked about solid fuels: wood, charcoal and coal, where charcoal and coal are ultimately derived from wood.

Wood, however, though the most easily available fuel in very ancient times, was by no means the only one. There was another fuel, and it must have been an accidental one.

After all, if meat is roasting over an open fire, fat upon it will sizzle and burn. Or it will melt, drip down, and burn in the fire beneath. Eventually, people watching this will get the idea that animal fat (or plant fat, like olive oil, for that matter) will burn.

So, at some dim time in the past, torches were invented. Perhaps the idea arose when resinous wood was burned. Such wood burned with a brighter light and for a longer time than dry wood did, but once the

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resin was burned, the advantage was gone.

Some prehistoric genius, therefore, thought of making wood artificially resinous by dipping a piece of porous wood, or a bundle of reeds, into oil or melted fat. The torch would then burn brightly, and, when the flame started to fade, it could always be extinguished and dipped in liquid fuel again. (Or a new piece of wood might be used —wood was cheap.)

But then someone was bound to think of the fact that the wood was unnecessary

Suppose you hollow out a depression in a rock and fill it with absorbent material, such as tinder or moss. You then soak the material with oil or melted fat and set it on fire. It will burn for a long time, and, when the fire burns low, you need only carefully add a little more liquid fuel. This is a "lamp" (from a Greek word for "torch"), and it came into use from 20,000 to 70,000 years ago.

Of course, you can carry a torch and hold it high for better or wider illumination, whereas a primitive lamp is too easily tipped and spilled to be portable.

Naturally, lamps would be improved. Instead of making them out of rock, you could make them out of clay or, later, metal, giving them a more convenient shape and making them lighter.

Furthermore, the "wick" must have been invented early on. In a sense, it was merely a tiny, artificial torch. One only needed something porous, some twisted moss, a pithy reed, or, later, a strip of textile material, which would absorb oil. One end is placed in the oil, which soaks up into the wick, and the other end is set on fire. As the oil burns, more oil invades the wick from below.

The lamp can be covered, to minimize danger of spillage, though of course, some opening had to remain for the wick to emerge. More than one wick could be used to give more than one flame and produce more light. As many as twenty wicks in one lamp have been found in archeological digs. However, the more wicks there are and the more light one gets, the faster the oil is used up. (This may have been one of the earliest hints to humanity that there is no such thing as a free lunch.)

By ancient Greek times, lamps looked something like teapots, with a handle at one end, so they could easily be carried about, and the wick in the spout. This is the familiar "Aladdin's lamp" shape, and we can wonder why it was that rubbing a lamp — rather than a vase or a chair — should produce that wonderful genie.

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It strikes me that a lamp already has a slave at one's service. The lamp makes it possible to carry light wherever one goes, and you can't overestimate the importance of light in primitive times (or, for that matter, now). It seems to me that the slave of the lamp (light) is so important that getting a genie out of it to shower you with palaces, wealth, and women is something you would expect of a lamp.

Of course, it is possible to have a wick without a lamp. If you impregnate the wick with solid fat of one sort of another, and pile the fat about it, you can set fire to the wick on top and it will slowly burn downward, as melted fat soaks up the wick. This is a "candle" (from a Latin word meaning "to glisten").

Candles go back to at least 3000 B.C.

What were the fuels used in lamps? In northern climates, where fire was more needed and more used and where lamps and candles may have been invented, the blubber from sea-animals was the logical choice. Even as late as the 19th Century, whale oil was a common lamp fuel.

In more southerly climates, it would be plant oils that were used — olive oil, linseed oil, and so on.

For candles, what was mostly used was tallow, the solid fat of cattle and sheep. Wax could also be used; in particular, beeswax, which was hard and which burned cleanly and odorlessly. However, beeswax was expensive and was used mainly in churches and in aristocratic homes. Spermaceti, a wax from sperm whales, was used in more recent times.

Advances were made both in candles and lamps in the 19th Century.

For instance, as candles burned down, the charred wick (or "snuff") would gradually stick up above a flame, looking ugly and producing smoke. Therefore, anyone who used candles had to keep "snuffing" it; that is cutting off the spent wick judiciously, and that was a bother.

In 1824, however, a Frenchman, Jean Jacques de Cambacere (1753-1824), invented a braided wick that bent as it charred so that its end moved into the hot part of the flame and gradually burned away. There was no need of snuffing with such candles — a small matter, but something that must have been a delight to candle-users.

Then there was a French chemist, Michel Eugene Chevreul (1786-1889 — yes, he lived to be 103), who worked with fats, found they were glyceryl esters of fatty acids, and isolated the fatty acids. In 1825, he took out a patent on the manufacture of candles made out of these

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fatty acids. They were harder than tallow candles, less greasy, gave a brighter light, needed less care, and didn't smell bad.

It is because candles were so improved that we can still use them today for show (not for light). You'll find candles at every banquet and at almost every restaurant table doing nothing but lending "atmosphere." I keep thinking that if Cambacere and Chevreul had minded their own business and if candles still needed snuffing and still sank, they wouldn't be here, and there'd be one fire hazard the less.

Lamps were also improved in modern times. A Swiss physicist, Aime Argand (1755-1803), in about 1783 invented a lamp with a glass chimney (the familiar lamp of the 19th Century rural America) and a device for introducing a current of air through the lamp that resulted in a brighter light and less smoke.

Then there was the Austrian chemist, Karl Auer von Wellsbach (1858-1929), who thought that a lamp light might be even brighter if the flame would heat some chemical that would then glow with a brilliant white light. He tried many substances that might glow at high heat without melting and then finally found what he wanted.

If he impregnated a cylindrical fabric with thorium nitrate, to which was added a small percentage of cerium nitrate, he got a brilliant white glow. This "Welsbach mantle" was patented in 1885 and produced the best oil lamps yet seen.

Now let us backtrack a little.

Plant life, as I explained last month, could slowly, under pressure, and in the relative absence of oxygen, lose what oxygen and hydrogen it had and turn into coal, which is mostly carbon.

Animal life, too, can undergo changes. The fat droplets from innumerable one-celled organisms can lose what little oxygen they have and become a complex mixture of hydrocarbons; compounds whose molecules are made up of carbon and hydrogen atoms only.

This mixture is called "petroleum" (from Greek words meaning "rock oil," because it is a liquid fuel that comes from the rocky ground, rather than from plants or animals. (Of course, it came from animals originally, but those who named it didn't know that.)

Generally, petroleum deposits exist underground, where they are slowly formed, but the viscissitudes of geological change sometimes bring them fairly close to the surface or even right up to it. In that case, the smaller molecules, which evaporate easily, do evaporate and vanish, leaving behind a tarry residue made up of larger molecules.

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This residue is most commonly found in those places which are the richest in underground reservoirs of petroleum — in the Middle East. What we now call Iraq and Iran (but which ancient Greeks called Mesopotamia and Persia) were the richest.

The residue has received a variety of names. It might be called "asphalt," for instance (a word of uncertain origin). There is enough asphalt about the Dead Sea for the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (37-100) to call it, in Latin, "Lacus Asphaltites" ("Lake Asphalt").

Asphalt might also be called "bitumen," or "slime," or, most commonly, "pitch."

The ancients who lived in the Middle East found uses for pitch. It was sticky; it wouldn't mix with water; and it wouldn't allow water to soak through. If pitch were smeared on wooden objects, and if it filled the cracks between them, it would make them waterproof. Hence, it was of great use in ship building.

Thus, when God directs Noah to build the ark, he says, "Make thee an ark of gopher wood; rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch." (Genesis 6:14).

Again, bitumen could be used as a mortar to hold bricks together. Thus, when the builders of the tower of Babel got to work "they had bricks for stone, and slime had they for mortar." (Genesis 11:3).

When there was a battle in the vale of Siddim near the Dead Sea, the Bible remarks that "the vale of Siddim was full of slimepits." (Genesis 14:10).

What's more, there was no question that the ancients knew that bitumen would burn, for Isaiah, when he wanted to describe how miserable the world situation would be if God got slightly annoyed with humanity, said: "And the streams thereof shall be turned into pitch, and the dust thereof into brimstone and the land thereof shall become burning pitch." (Isaiah 34:10).

The most interesting mention, however, is in connection with Moses' babyhood. As the Hebrew boy babies were being killed, Moses's mother, to save him, "took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein" (Exodus 2:3).

This makes sense, for an "ark of bulrushes" would be a little boat made out of papyrus reeds, which is just the sort of thing an Egyptian would make. The pitch would be added to make it water tight.

The catch is that there was no pitch in Egypt to speak of. The Egyptians only started using it in later days when they imported it from Mesopotamia. Whatever they used to make their boats waterproof,

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it wasn't pitch.

Why, then, does the tale of the ark of bulrushes talk about pitch? Because it is a borrowing from another story.

Sargon of Agade, a Mesopotamian conquerer who lived perhaps twelve centuries before the time of Moses, was the kind of hero concerning whom later storytellers invented legends, and a favorite legend for any hero would deal with how the hero escaped death as a baby. The Greeks told such stories of baby escape about Perseus, Oedipus, and Hercules. The Romans told it of Romulus and Remus. The Israelites told it of Abraham as well as of Moses. The Christians told it of Jesus. But Sargon of Agade, as far as we know, was the first.

In order to save him from death, Sargon was placed in a little boat in the Euphrates river and he was saved by a gardener. Undoubtedly, Sargon's boat was well coated with pitch.

The story was borrowed by the Biblical legend-makers and used for Moses, and they borrowed the pitch, too.

There would, of course, be places where petroleum seepage produced small molecule fractions that were in the process of evaporating, but were seeping upward more or less as rapidly as they evaporated. In that case, there would always be vapors present that, if present in enough concentration, would be inflammable.

I imagine that, every once in a while, someone would start a campfire near one of those places and, if conditions were right, there might be a flash of light and then a flame flickering along the ground in some particular spot.

Anyone involved in such a thing would want to hurry away, I suppose. If sufficient curiosity were aroused, though, he might watch from what he thought was a safe distance and, if so, he might note that the flame seemed to have no intention of going out, and didn't seem to consume fuel in the ordinary way.

Moses is supposed to have seen something like that. "And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed." (Exodus 3:2).

Such un-consuming "eternal fires" may have stirred the religious feelings of some. Even ordinary fires were mysterious things that clearly brought great good to humanity and offered dangers, too. It would not be unusual for some primitive people to attribute divine qualities and powers to a fire. The Zoroastrian Persians did so and are sometimes referred to as "fire-worshippers."

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On the other hand, some may have been frightened by these fires from the ground and thought them the work of demons. Such fires, and the experience of volcanoes, may have helped convince people of an underground of eternal fire, thus giving rise to the legendary existence of a Hell in which the spirits of the dead were tormented.

In the places where petroleum seeped upward, a liquid might be obtained which burned. As a fuel, it would seem very much like ordinary oil from plants and animals. The Persians called this burning liquid "neft," which may have meant "liquid." The Greeks picked up the term and called it "naphtha."

Naphtha is mentioned in two places in the Apocrypha. The Book of Daniel tells of three young men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who were thrown into a fiery furnace for defying Nebuchadrezzar's religious views, but who were saved by a divine miracle. In the apocryphal book "The Song of the Three Young Men," it says in verse 23: "Now the king's servants who threw him in did not cease feeding the furnace fires with naphtha, pitch, tow, and brush."

In the book of 2 Maccabees, written some time in the 1st Century B.C., the tale is told of the building of the second Temple, five centuries earlier, after the Persians permitted some Jews to return to Jerusalem. There would naturally be a search for some relic of the First Temple that would represent a continuation of sanctity for the Second. In particular (says the story) they were looking for the fire that might have been preserved by pious men, or by a divine miracle, for the seventy years or so that had elapsed since the destruction of the First Temple. However, "they had not found fire but thick liquid" (2 Maccabees 1:20). They sprinkled this liquid on the wood on which materials for a sacrifice had been laid and "a great fire blazed up, so that all marveled." (2 Maccabees 1:22).

This mysterious liquid, according to 2 Maccabees 1:36, was called "nephthar," the meaning of which was given as "purification," but the verse goes on to say "by most people it is called 'naphtha.'"

Pitch was not found in the Middle East only. There were petroleum seepages reported in various parts of Europe, and, once Europeans discovered the Americas, seepages were found there, too.

In March 1595, Walter Raleigh (1552-1618) visited the island of Trinidad, where he was the first European to see "Pitch Lake," which is a lake consisting of about 10 million tons of asphalt.

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People valued such pitch, for new uses were found for it. Asphalt was used for paving roads, the softer portions of pitch were used as a liniment. Clear oil obtained from it ("mineral oil") was used as a laxative. The thicker portions, when they burned, produced a foul smelling smoke that was used to fumigate houses.

In the 19th Century, inflammable liquids were sought for use in lamps, liquids that might be cheaper and in more dependable supply than whale oil.

Coal was heated to yield "coal oil," for instance. It was also possible to heat and obtain oil out of asphalt from Trinidad, or out of certain kinds of rocks called "shale" that seemed to be impregnated with oily material (hence it was called "oil shale").

In 1853, a British physician, Abraham Gesner (1797-1864), developed a process that would yield an inflammable liquid from asphalt. Because it was driven out of a waxy mixture of solid hydrocarbons, Gesner called the liquid "kerosene" from a Greek word for "wax." The British call it "paraffin" these days, but in the United States it is still called kerosene.

Kerosene was ideal for lamps (and nowadays when we think of oil lamps, we think of them as "kerosene lamps" as though that were a single word). The trouble was, though, that even with Gesner's process there wasn't enough kerosene to meet the great demands the lamps of Europe and America represented.

The short supply was bound to continue as long as people dealt with petroleum that had reached the surface, been exposed to open air, and had dried out. The kerosene fraction was vaporized and gone, and only small amounts could be squeezed out of the pitch that remained.

But what if one could dig down and come across the petroleum before any of it had evaporated, when it might be rich in the small-molecule fractions that would include kerosene? In that case, the liquid petroleum might be heated and made to give off kerosene in enormous quantities.

This notion of digging for liquid was a very old one. After all, one digs down to the water table and has a well, which will yield cold, fresh water at all times.

As long as two thousand years ago, people in China and Burma were digging, not for fresh water, but for brine. This they would heat to obtain salt for use in preserving food and for other purposes.

Apparently, every once in a while they brought up petroleum, too. They had no direct use for this,

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but they didn't throw it away, either. They would collect it and use it as a fuel for a flame that would drive the water away from the brine, leaving the salt behind.

We now switch to a railway conductor named Edwin Laurentine Drake (1819-1880). He had been born in New York State, and he worked in New Haven, Connecticut.

As a matter of investment, he had bought some stock in the Pennsylvania Rock Oil Company. (Remember that "rock oil" is English for "petroleum.") The company made its money by collecting petroleum that had seeped up to the surface near Titusville, Pennsylvania and selling it for medicinal purposes. Titusville is in the northwestern part of the state, about ninety miles north of Pittsburgh.

There was enough petroleum seepage for medical use, but not enough to satisfy the lamps of the nation. Drake, in view of his investment, would have liked a lot of petroleum and a lot of sales to lamp owners.

As it happened, he knew about the Chinese drilling for brine and their habit of occasionally bringing up petroleum, so he studied the methods for such drilling. Then, in 1858, he persuaded the Company to lease him some land on which he might start drilling operations.

He started drilling and, on August 18, 1859, having drilled down for 69½ feet, he struck oil. It was the first oil well to have been drilled into the surface of the Earth.

Once Drake succeeded, others flocked to the spot and began drilling for oil on their own. Northwestern Pennsylvania became the first oil field in the world, and boom towns sprang up. Drake hadn't patented his methods, however, and he wasn't a clever businessman, so he didn't become rich. In fact, he died a poor man.

However, people continued to drill, and not just in Pennsylvania, either. Before the 1800's were finished, there were oil wells, in 14 states, from New York in the east to California in the west; from Wyoming in the north, to Texas in the south. Oil wells were dug overseas, too, in Baku in the Caucasus, for instance.

The petroleum was refined and used chiefly as a source for kerosene, and the fifty years between 1860 and 1910 were the golden age of the kerosene lamp. With the glass chimneys, and the wicks, and the air currents, and soon the Welsbach mantles in addition, the lamps lit up homes as they had never been lit up before.

Kerosene put whale oil out of business and removed that reason, at least, for killing the magnificent cetaceans. (Unfortunately, other

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reasons cropped up.) What's more, there seemed enough petroleum in the ground to supply kerosene for lighting for many centuries.

However, something happened, and it was called the electric light (see TO THE TOP, F&SF, September 1976). In 1879, Thomas Alva Edison (1847-1931) invented a practical electric light and designed the kind of generating station that could keep lights burning steadily even as some were turned on and others were turned off. It was the greatest invention of the greatest inventor we know by name.

The electric light did not sweep the world instantly. Generating stations had to be built, cables and wires had to be laid, electric light fixtures had to be installed. What's more, the first light bulbs didn't last long and were unpleasant to look at with their bare filaments. The bulbs had to be improved by filling them with nitrogen, rather than with vacuum; by frosting the glass rather than leaving it clear; by substituting tungsten filaments for carbon ones, and so on.

Still, as early as October 10, 1881, the Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera, "Patience," moved to a new theatre, the *Savoy*, the first theater to be equipped with electric lighting. When the next play, "Iolanthe," opened on November 25, 1882, the chorus of fairies had their wands tipped with electric lights, which made a great sensation.

It was not till the time of World War I, however, that electric lights had won their victory, leaving the kerosene lamps to become a charming antique and nothing more. (Unlike candles, they are not even used for ceremonial reasons.)

Nevertheless, as I mentioned at the start of last month's essay, even as late as 1925, I was living in a Brooklyn apartment that did *not* have electric lights.

You would have thought that, with the passing of the kerosene lamp and the steady dwindling of the need for kerosene, the petroleum industry, having had its short lived boom, would now dwindle and pine and become as antique as the lamps themselves.

Not a bit of it. The industry continued to grow, and became an enormous giant.

We'll continue with the subject, therefore, next month.

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In their individual writings, both Paul Di Filippo and mathematician Rudy Rucker juggle possible pasts and futures, yesterdays and tomorrows. With "Instability" they team up to create a maelstrom of possibilities which are tossed back and forth and culminate in a frenzied, zany event that might have happened a ways back . . . and maybe did . . . or didn't.

Instability

By Rudy Rucker and Paul Di Filippo

JACK AND NEAL, loose and blasted, sitting on the steps of the ramshackle porch of Bill Burroughs's Texas shack. Burroughs is out in the yard, catatonic in his orgone box, a copy of the Mayan codices in his lap. He's already fixed M twice today. Neal was cleaning the seeds out of a shoebox full of maryjane. Time is thick and slow as honey. In the distance the rendering company's noon whistle blows long, shrill and insistent. The rendering company is a factory where they cut up the cows that're too diseased to ship to Chicago. Shoot and cut and cook to tallow and canned cancer consommé.

Burroughs rises to his feet like a figure in a well-greased Swiss clock. "There is scrabbling," goes Bill. "There is scrabbling behind the dimensions. Bastards made a hole somewhere. You ever read Lovecraft's *Colour Out of Space*, Jack?"

"I read it in jail," says Neal, secretly proud. "Dig, Bill, your mention of that document ties in so exactly with my most recent thought

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mode that old Jung would hop a hard-on."

"Mhwee-heee-heee," says Jack. "The Shadow knows."

"I'm talking about this bomb foolishness," harrumphs Burroughs, stalking stifflegged over to stand on the steps. "The paper on the floor in the roadhouse john last night said there's a giant atom-bomb test taking place tomorrow at White Sands. They're testing out the fucking 'trigger bomb' to use on that godawful new *hydrogen* bomb Edward Teller wants against the Rooshians. Pandora's box, boys, and we're not talking cooze. That bomb's going off in New Mexico tomorrow, and right here and now the shithead meatflayers' noon whistle is getting us all ready for World War Three, and if we're all ready for that, then we're by Gawd ready to be a great civilian army, yes, soldiers for Joe McCarthy and Harry J. Anslinger, poised to stomp out the Reds 'n' queers 'n' dopefiends. Science brings us this. I wipe my queer junkie ass with science, boys. The Mayans had it aaall figured out a loooong time ago. Now take this von Neumann fella. . . ."

"You mean Django Reinhardt?" goes Jack, stoned and rude. "Man, this is your life, their life, my life, a dog's life, God's life, the Life of Riley. The army's genius von Neumann of the desert, Bill, it was in the Sunday paper Neal and I were rolling sticks on in Tuscaloosa, I just got an eidetic memory flash of it, you gone wigged cat, it was right before Neal nailed that cute Dairy Queen waitress with the Joan Crawford nose."

Neal goes: "Joan Crawford, Joan Crawfish, Joan Fishhook, Joan Rawshanks in the fog. *McVoutie!*" He's toking a hydrant roach, and his jay-wrapping fingers are laying rapid cable. Half the damn box is already twisted up.

Jack warps a brutal moodswing. There's no wine. *Ti Jack could use a widdly sup pour bon peek, like please, you ill cats, get me off this Earth. . . .* Is he saying this *aloud,* in front of Neal and Burroughs?

"And fuck the chicken giblets," chortles Neal obscurely, joyously, in there, and then suggests, by actions as much as by words, *Is he really talking, Jack?* "That we get back to what's really important, such as rolling up this here, ahem, um, urp, Mexican see-gar, yes!"

Jack crabcakes slideways on fingertips and heels to Neal's elbow, and they begin to lovingly craft and fashion and croon upon — and even it would not be too much to say give birth to — a beautiful McDeVoutieful hairseeded twat of a reefer, the roach of which will be larger than any two normal sticks.

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They get off good.

Meanwhile, Bill Burroughs is slacked back in his rocker, refixed and not quite on the nod because he's persistently irritated, both by the thought of the hydrogen bomb and, more acutely, by the flybuzz derry Times Square jive of the jabbering teaheads. Time passes, so very slowly for Sal and Dean, so very fast for William Lee.

So Doctor Miracle and Little Richard are barreling along the Arizona highway, heading east Route 40 out of Vegas, their pockets full of silver cartwheels from the grinds they've thimblerigged, and also wallets bulging with the hi-denom bills they demanded when cashing in their chips after beating the bank at the roulette wheels of six different casinos with their unpatented probabilistic scams that are based on the vectors of neutrons through six inches of lead as transferred by spacetime Feynman diagrams to the workings of those rickety-clickety simple-ass macroscopic systems of ball and slots.

Doctor Miracle speaks. He attempts precision, to compensate for the Hungarian accent and for the alcohol-induced spread in bandwidth.

"Ve must remember to zend Stan Ulam a postcard from Los Alamos, reporting za zuccess of his Monte Carlo modeling method."

"It woulda worked even better over in Europe," goes Little Richard. "They got no double-zero slots on their wheels."

Doctor Miracle nods sagely. He's a plump guy in his fifties: thinning hair, cozy chin, faraway eyes. He's dressed in a double-breasted suit, with a bright hulagirl necktie that's wide as a pound of bacon.

Little Richard is younger, skinnier, more Jewish, and he has a thick pompadour. He's wearing baggy khakis and a white T-shirt with a pack of Luckies rolled up in the left sleeve.

It is not immediately apparent that these two men are ATOMIC WIZARDS, QUANTUM SHAMANS, PLUTONIUM PROPHETS, and BE-BOPPIN' A-BOMB PEEAITCHDEES!

Doctor Miracle, meet Richard Lernmore. Little Richard, say hello to Johnny von Neumann!

There is a case of champagne sitting on the rear seat in between them. Each of the A-scientists has an open bottle from which he swigs, while their car, a brand-new 1950 big-finned land-boat of a two-toned populuxe pink'n'green Caddy, speeds along the highway.

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There is no one driving. The front seat is empty.

Von Neumann, First Annointed Master of Automata, has rigged up the world's premier autopilot, you dig. He never could drive very well, and now he doesn't have to. Fact is, no one has to! The Caddy had front- and side-mounted radar that feeds into a monster contraption in the trunk, baby cousin to Weiner and Ulam's Los Alamos MANIAC machine, a thing all vacuum tubes and cams, all cogs and Hollerith sorting rods, a mechanical brain that transmits cybernetic impulses directly to the steering, gas, and brake mechanisms.

The Trilateral Commission has rules that the brain in the Cad's trunk is too cool for Joe Blow, much too cool, and a selfdriving car isn't going to make it to the assembly line ever. The country needs only a few of these supercars, and this one has been set aside for the use and utmost ease for the two genius-type riders who wish to discuss high quantum-physical, metamathematical, and cybernetic topics without the burden of paying attention to the road. Johnny and Dickie's periodic Alamos-to-Vegas jaunts soak up a lot of the extra-nervous tension these important bomb builders suffer from.

"So whadda ya think of my new method for scoring showgirls?" asks Lernmore.

"Dickie, although za initial trials vere encouraging, ve must have more points on the graph before ve can extrapolate," replies von Neumann. He looks sad. "You may haff scored, you zelfish little prick, but *I* — I did not achieve satisfactory sexual release. Far from it."

"Waa'll," drawls Lernmore, "I got a fave niteclub in El Paso where the girls are hotter'n gamma rays and pretty as parity conservation. You'll get what you need for sure, Johnny. We could go right instead of left at Albuquerque and be there before daylight. Everyone at Los Alamos'll be busy with the White Sands test anyway. Security won't look for us till Monday, and by then we'll be back, minus several milliliters of semen."

"El Paso," mutters von Neumann, taking a gadget out of his inner jacket pocket. It's . . . THE FIRST POCKET CALCULATOR! Thing's the size of a volume of the *Britannica*, with Bakelite buttons, and what makes it truly hot is that it's got all the road distances from the *Rand McNally Road Atlas* databased onto the spools of a small wire-recorder inside. Von Neumann's exceeding proud of it, and although he could run the algorithm faster in his head, he plugs their present speed and location into the device; calls

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up the locations of Las Vegas, Albuquerque, El Paso, and Los Alamos; and proceeds to massage the data.

"You're quite right, Dickie," he announces presently, still counting the flashes of the calculator's lights. "Ve can do as you say and indeed eefen return to za barracks before Monday zunrise. Venn is za test scheduled, may I ask?"

"Eight A.M. Sunday morning."

Von Neumann's mouth broadens in a liverlipped grin. "How zynchronistic. Ve'll be passing White Sands just zen. I haff not vittnessed a bomb test since Trinity. And zis is za biggest one yet; zis bomb is, as you know, Dickie, za Ulam cascade initiator for za new hydrogen bomb. I'm for it! Let me reprogram za brain!"

Lernmore crawls over the front seat while the car continues its mad careening down the dizzy interstate, passing crawling tourist Buicks and mom'n'dad Studebakers. He lugs the case of champagne into the front seat with him. Von Neumann removes the upright cushion in the backseat and pries off the panel, exposing the brain in the trunk. Consulting his calculator from time to time, von Neumann begins reprogramming the big brain by yanking switchboard-type wires and reinserting them.

"I'm tired of plugging chust metal sockets, Richard. Viz za next girl, I go first."

Now it's night, and the stoned beats are drunk and high on bennies, too. Neal, his face all crooked, slopes through Burroughs's shack and picks Bill's car keys off the dresser in the dinette where Joan is listening to the radio and scribbling on a piece of paper. Crossing the porch, thievishly heading for the Buick, Neal thinks Bill doesn't see, but Bill does.

Burroughs the beat morphinist, whose weary disdain has shaded catastrophically with the Benzedrine and alcohol into fried impatience, draws the skeletized sawed off shotgun from the tube of hidden gutterpipe that this same Texafied Burroughs has suspended beneath a large hole drilled in the eaten wood of his porch floor. He fires a 12-gauge shotgun blast past Neal and into Neal's cleaned and twisted box of maryjane, barely missing Jack.

"*Whew, no doubt,*" goes Neal, tossing Burroughs the keys.

"Have ye hard drink, mine host?" goes Jack, trying to decide if the gun really went off or not. "Perhaps a pint of whiskey in the writing-desk, old top? A spot of sherry?"

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"To continue my afternoon fit of thought," says Burroughs, pocketing his keys, "I was talking about thermonuclear destruction and about the future of all humanity, which species has just about been squashed to spermacetae in the rictal mandrake spasms of Billy Sunday's pimpled asscheeks." He pumps another shell into the shotgun's chamber. His eyes are crazed goofball pinpoints. "I am sorry I ever let you egregious dope-suckin' latahs crash here. I mean you especially, jailbird conman Cassady."

Neal sighs and hunkers down to wail on the bomber Jack's lit off a smoldering scrap of shotgun wadding. Before long he and Jack are far into a rap, possibly sincere, possibly jive, a new rap wrapped around the concept that the three hipsters assembled here on the splintery porch neath the gibbous prairie moon have formed or did or will form or, to be quite accurate, *were forming and still are forming right then and there*, an analogue of those Holy B-Movie Goofs, THE THREE STOOGES!

"Yes," goes Jack, "those Doomed Saints of Chaos, loosed on the work-adaddy world to scramble the Charles Dickens cark and swink of BLOOEY YER FIRED, those Stooge Swine are the anarchosyndicalist truly wigged submarxists, Neal man, *bikkhu* Stooges goosing ripeassmelons and eating fried chicken for supper. *We* are the Three Stooges."

"Bill is Moe," says Neal, hot on the beam, batting his eyes at Bill, who wonders if it's time to shed his character-armor. "Mister Serious Administerer of Fundament Punishments and Shotgun Blasts, and me with a Lederhosen Ass!"

"Ah you, Neal," goes Jack, "you're Curly, angelic madman saint of the uncaught motebeam flybuzz fly!"

"And Kerouac is Larry," rheums Burroughs, weary with the knowledge. "*Mopple-lipped, lisped, muxed, and completely flunk* is the phrase, eh, Jack?"

"Born to die," goes Jack. "We're all born to die, and I hope it do be cool, Big Bill, if we goam take yo cah. Vootie-oh-oh." He holds out his hand for the keys.

"Fuck it," says Bill. "Who needs this noise." He hands Jack the keys, and before you know it, Neal's at the wheel of the two-ton black Buick, gunning that straight-eight mill and burping the clutch. Jack's at his side, and they're on the road with a long honk good-bye.

In the night there's reefer and plush seats and the radio, and Neal is past spaced, off in his private land that few but Jack and Alan can

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He's dreaming he's driving to an atom-bomb test in a stolen car, which is true.

see. He whips the destination on Jack.

"This car is a frontrow seat to the A-blast."

"What."

"We'll ball this jack to White Sands, New Mexico, dear Jack, right on time for the bombtest Sunday 8 A.M. I stole some of Bill's M, man, we'll light up *on* it."

In Houston they stop and get gas and wine and benny and Bull Durham cigarette papers and keep flying west.

Sometime in the night, Jack starts to fade in and out of horror dreams. There's a lot of overtime detox dreamwork that he's logged off of too long. One time he's dreaming he's driving to an atom-bomb test in a stolen car, which is of course true, and then after that he's dreaming he's the dead mythic character in black and white that he's always planned to be. Not to mention the dreams of graves and Memere and the endless blood sausages pulled out of Jack's gullet by some boffable blonde's sinister boyfriend....

"... been oh rock and roll gospeled in on the *bomb foolishness*...," Neal is going when Jack screams and falls off the backseat he's stretched out on. There's hard wood and metal on the floor. "... and Jack, you do understand, buckaroo, that I have hornswoggled you into yet another new and unprecedentedly harebrained swing across the dairy fat of her jane's spreadness?"

"Go," goes Jack feebly, feeling around on the backseat floor. Short metal barrel, lightly oiled. Big flat disk of a magazine. Fuckin' crazy Burroughs. It's a Thompson submachinegun Jack's lying on.

"And, ah Jack, man, I knew you'd know past the suicidal norm, Norm, that it was ... *DeVoutie!*" Neal fishes a Bakelite ocarina out of his shirt pocket and tootles a thin, horrible note. "Goof on this, Jack, I just shot M, and now I'm so high I can drive with my eyes closed."

Giggling Leda Atomica tugs at the shoulders of her low-cut peasant blouse with the darling petitpoint floral embroidery, trying to conceal the vertiginous depths of her cleavage, down which Doctor Miracle is attempting to pour flat champagne. What a ride this juicy brunette is having!

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Leda had been toking roadside Albuquerque monoxide till 11:55 this Saturday night, thumb outstretched and skirt hiked up to midthigh, one highheel foot perched on a little baby-blue handcase with nylons'n'bra-straps trailing from its crack. Earlier that day she'd parted ways with her employer, an Oakie named Oather. Leda'd been working at Oather's juke-joint as a waitress and as a performer. Oather had put her in this like act wherein she strutted on the bar in highheels while a trained swan untied the strings of her atomgirl costume, a cute leatherette twopiece with conical silver lamé titcups and black shorts patterned in intersecting friendly-atom ellipses. Sometimes the swan bit Leda, which really pissed her off. Saturday afternoon the swan had escaped from his pen, wandered out onto the road, and been mashed by a semi full of hogs.

"That was the only bird like that in Arizona," yelled Oather. "Why dintcha latch the pen?"

"Maybe people would start payin' to watch you lick my butt," said Leda evenly. "It's about all you're good for, limpdick."

Etcetera.

Afternoon and early-evening traffic was sparse. The drivers that did pass were all upstanding family men in sensible Plymouths, honest salesmen too tame for the tasty trouble Leda's bod suggested.

Standing there at the roadside, Leda almost gave up hope. But then, just before midnight, the gloom parted and here comes some kind of barrel-assing Necco-wafer-colored Caddy!

When the radars hit Leda's boobs and returned their echoes to the control mechanism, the cybernetic brain nearly had an aneurysm. Not trusting Lernmore's promises, von Neumann had hardwired the radars for just such a tramp-girl eventuality, coding hitchhiking Jane Russell T&A parameters into the electronic brain's very circuits. The Caddy's headlights started blinking like a fellah in a sandstorm, concealed sirens went off, and roman candles mounted on the rear bumper discharged, shooting rainbow fountains of glory into the night.

"SKIRT ALERT!" whooped Doctor Miracle and Little Richard.

Before Leda knew what was happening, the cybernetic Caddy had braked at her exact spot. The rear door opened, Leda and her case were snatched on in, and the car roared off, the wind of its passage scattering the tumbleweeds.

Leda knew she was hooked up with some queer fellas as soon as she noticed the empty driver's seat.

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She wasn't reassured by their habit of reciting backward all the signs they passed.

"Pots!"

"Egrem!"

"Sag!"

But soon Leda took a shine to Doctor Miracle and Little Richard. Their personalities grew on her in direct proportion to the amount of bubbly she downed. By the time they hit Truth or Consequences, N.M., they're scattin' to the cool sounds of Wagner's *Nibelungenlied* on the longdistance radio, and Johnny is trying to baptize her tits.

"Dleiy!" croons Doctor Miracle.

"Daeha thgil ciffart!" goes Lernmore, all weaseled in on Leda's other side.

"Kcuf em won syob!" says Leda, who's gone seven dry weeks without the straight-on loving these scientists are so clearly ready to provide.

So they pull into the next tourist cabins and get naked and find out what factorial three really means. I mean . . . do they get it on or *what!* Those stagfilm stars Candy Barr and Smart Alec have got nothing on Leda, Dickie, and Doctor Miracle! Oh baby!

And then it's near dawn and they have breakfast at a greasy spoon, and then they're on Route 85 south. Johnny's got the brain programmed to drive them right to the 7:57 A.M. White Sands spacetime coordinate; he's got the program tweaked down to the point where the Cad will actually cruise past ground zero and nestle itself behind the observation bunker, leaving them ample time to run inside and join the other top bomb boys.

Right before the turnoff to the White Sands road, von Neumann decides that things are getting dull.

"Dickie, activate the jacks!"

"Yowsah!"

Lernmore leans over the front seat and flips a switch that's breadboarded into the dash. The car starts to buck and rear like a wild bronco, its front and tail alternately rising and plunging. It's another goof of the wondercaddy — von Neumann has built B-52 landing gear in over the car's axles.

As the Caddy porpoises down the highway, its three occupants are laughing and falling all over each other, playing grabass, champagne spilling from a open bottle.

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Suddenly, without warning, an OOGA-OOGA Klaxon starts to blare.

"Collision imminent," shouts von Neumann.

"Hold onto your tush!" advises Lernmore.

"Be careful," screams Leda and wriggles to the floor.

Lernmore manages to get a swift glimpse of a nightblack Buick driving down the twolane road's exact center, heading straight toward them. No one is visible in the car.

Then the road disappears, leaving only blue sky to fill the windshield. There is a tremendous screech and roar of ripping metal, and the Caddy shudders slowly to a stop.

When Lernmore and von Neumann peer out of their rear window, they see the Buick stopped back there. It is missing its entire roof, which lies crumpled in the road behind it.

For all Neal's bragging, M's not something he's totally used to. He has to stop and puke a couple of times in El Paso, early early with the sky going white. There's no sympathy from Jack, 'cause Jack picked up yet another bottle of sweet wine outside San Antone, and now he's definitely passed. Neal has the machinegun up in the front seat with him; he knows he ought to put it in the trunk in case the cops ever pull them over, but the *dapperness* of the weapon is more than Neal can resist. He's hoping to get out in the desert with it and blow away some cacti.

North of Las Cruces the sun is almost up, and Neal is getting a bad disconnected feeling; he figures it's the morphine wearing off and decides to fix again. He gets a Syrette out of the Buick's glove compartment and skinpops it. Five more miles and the rosy flush is on him, he feels better than he's felt all night. The flat empty dawn highway is a gray triangle that's driving the car. Neal gets the idea he's a speck of paint on a perspective painting; he decides it would be cool to drive lying down. He lies down sideways on the driver's seat, and when he sees that it works, he grins and closes his eyes.

The crash tears open the dreams of Jack and Neal like some horrible fatman's canopener attacking oily smoked sardines. They wake up in a world that's horribly different.

Jack's sluggish and stays in the car, but Neal is out on the road doing dance incantation trying to avoid death that he feels so thick in the air. The Thompson submachinegun is in his hand, and he is, solely for the

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rhythm, you understand, firing it and raking the landscape, especially his own betraying Buick, though making sure the fatal lead is only in the lower parts, e.g. tires as opposed to sleepy Jack backseat or gastank, and, more than that, he's trying to keep himself from laying a steel-jacketed flat horizontal line of lead across the hapless marshmallow white faces of the rich boys in the Cadillac. They have a lownumber government license plate. Neal feels like Cagney in *White Heat*, possessed by total crazed rage against authority, ready for a maddog last-stand showdown that can culminate only in a fireball of glorious fuck-you-copper destruction. But there's only two of them here to kill. Not enough to go to the chair for. Not yet, no matter how bad the M comedown feels. Neal shoots lead arches over them until the gun goes to empty clicks.

Slowly, black Jack opens the holey Buick door, feeling God it's so horrible to be alive. He blows chunks on the meaningless asphalt. The two strange men in the Cadillac give off the scent of antilife evil, a taint buried deep in the bonemarrow, like strontium 90 in mother's milk. Bent down wiping his mouth and stealing an outlaw look at them, Jack flashes that these new guys have picked up their heavy death-aura from association with the very earth-frying, retina-blasting allbomb that he and Neal are being ineluctably drawn to by cosmic forces that Jack can *see*, as a matter of fact, ziggy lines sketched out against the sky as clear as any peyote mandala.

"Everyone hates me but Jesus," says Neal, walking over to the Cadillac, spinning the empty Thompson around his callused thumb. "Everyone is Jesus but me."

"Hi," says Lernmore. "I'm sorry we wrecked your car."

Leda rises up from the floor between von Neumann's legs, a fact not lost on Neal.

"We're on our way to the bombtest," croaks Jack, lurching over.

"Ve helped invent the bomb," says von Neumann. "Ve're rich and important men. Of course ve vill pay reparations and additionally offer you a ride to the test, *ezpecially* since you didn't kill us."

The Cadillac is obediently idling in park, its robot-brain having retracted the jacks and gone into standby mode after the oilpan-scraping collision. Neal mimes a widemouthed blowjob of the hot tip of the Thompson, flashes Leda an easy smile, slings the gun out into the desert, and then he and shuddery Jack clamber into the Cad's front seat. Leda,

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with her trademark practicality, climbs into the front seat with them and gives them a bottle of champagne. She's got the feeling these two brawny drifters can take her faster farther than science can.

Von Neumann flicks the RESET cyberswitch in the rearseat control panel, and the Cad rockets forward, pressing them all back into the deep cushioned seats. Neal fiddles with the steering wheel, fishtailing the Cad this way and that, then observes, "Seems like this tough short's got a mind of its own."

"Zis car's brobably as smart as you are," von Neumann can't help observing. Neal lets it slide: 7:49.

The Cad makes a hard squealing right turn onto the White Sands access road. There's a checkpoint farther on; but the soldiers recognize von Neumann's wheels and wave them right on through.

Neal fires up a last reefer and begins beating out a rhythm on the dash with his hands, grooving to the pulse of the planet, his planet awaiting its savior. Smoke trickles out of his mouth; he shotguns Leda, breathing the smoke into her mouth, wearing the glazed eyes of a mundane gnostic messiah, hip to a revelation of the righteous road to salvation. Jack's

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plugged in, too, sucking his last champagne, telepathy-rapping with Neal. It's almost time, and Doctor Miracle and Little Richard are too confused to stop it.

A tower rears on the horizon off to the left, and all at once the smart Cad veers off the empty twolane road and rams its way through a chain-link fence. Nerve-shattering scraping and lumbering thumps.

"Blease step on za gas a bit," says von Neumann, unsurprised. He programmed this shortcut in. "I still vant to go under za tower, but is only three minutes remaining. Za program is undercompensating for our unfortunate lost time." It is indeed 7:57.

Neal drapes himself over the wheel now, stone committed to this last holy folly. Feeling a wave of serene, yet exultant resignation, Jack says, "Go." It's almost all over now, he thinks, the endless roving and raging, brawling and fucking, the mad flights back and forth across and up and down the continent, the urge to get it all down on paper, every last feeling and vision in master-sketch detail, because we're all gonna die one day, man, all of us—

The Caddy, its sides raked of paint by the torn fence, hurtles on like God's own thunderbolt messenger, over pebbles and weeds, across the

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desert and the sloping glass craters of past tests. The tower is ahead: 7:58.

"Get ready, Uncle Sam," whispers Neal. "We're coming to cut your balls off. Hold the boys down, Jack."

Jack bodyrolls over the seat back into the laps of Lernmore and von Neumann. Can't have those mad scientists fiddle with the controls while Neal's pulling his cool automotive move!

Leda still thinks she's on a joyride and cozies up to Neal's biceps, and for a second it's just the way it's supposed to be, handsome hardrapping Neal at the wheel of big old bomb with a luscious brunette squeezed up against him like gum.

And now, before the guys in back can do much of anything, Neal's clipped through the tower's southern leg. As the tower starts to collapse, Neal, flying utterly on extrasensory instincts, slows just enough to pick up the bomb, which has been jarred prematurely off its release hook.

No Fat Boy, this gadget represents the ultimate to date in miniaturization: it's only about as big as a fifty-gallon oildrum, and about as weighty. It crunches down onto the Caddy's roof, bulging bent metal in just far enough to brush the heads of the riders.

And no, it doesn't go off. Not yet: 7:59.

Neal aims the mighty Cad at the squat concrete bunker half a mile off. This is an important test, the last step before the H-bomb, and all the key assholes are in there, every atomic brain in the free world, not to mention dignitaries and politicians aplenty, all come to witness this proof of American military superiority, all those shitnasty fuckheads ready to kill the future.

King Neal floors it and does a cowboy yodel, Jack is laughing and elbowing the scientists, Leda's screaming luridly, Dickie is talking too fast to understand, and Johnny is — 8:00.

They impact the bunker at 80 mph, folding up accordian-style, but not feeling it, as the mushroom blooms, and the atoms of them and the assembled bigwigs commingle in the quantum instability of the reaction event. Time forks.

Somewhere, somewhen, there now exists an Earth where there are no nuclear arsenals, where nations do not waste their substance on missiles and bombs, where no one wakes up thinking each morning might be the world's last — an Earth where two high, gone wigged cats wailed and grooved and ate up the road and Holy Goofed the world off its course.

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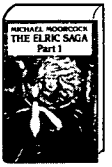

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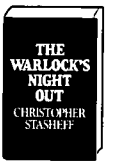

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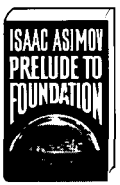

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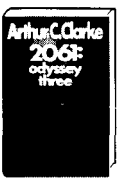

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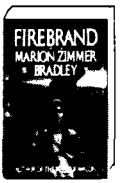

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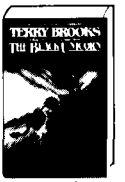

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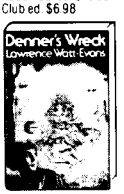

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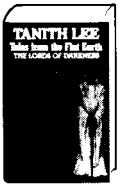

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